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AGATON SAX
AND THE
LONDON COMPUTER PLOT

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AGATON SAX AND THE LONDON COMPUTER PLOT

NILS-OLOF FRANZÉN

Illustrated by Quentin Blake



Target Books is a division of Universal-Tandem Publishing Co., Ltd., 14 Gloucester Road, London SW7 4RD

First published in Sweden by Stockholm. Alb. Bonniers Boktryckeri, 1970
and in Great Britain by André Deutsch, Ltd., 1973

First published in this edition by Universal-Tandem Publishing Co., Ltd. 1975

ISBN 0 426 10794 2

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English Translation Copyright © André Deutsch, Ltd., 1973
Drawings © Quentin Blake, 1973

Printed in Great Britain by The Anchor Press Ltd., and bound by Wm. Brendon & Son Ltd., both of Tiptree, Essex

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I

Storm clouds

'Scotland Yard.'

'Is Inspector Lisington there, please?'

'Speaking!'

'Good morning, sir. *The London Clarion* here. We'd like to interview you, Mr Lisington.'

Silence.

Hallo, Mr Lisington! Can you hear me?'

'No I can't. Speak up, will you.'

'*The London Clarion*! Can you hear me now?'

'Of course I can, don't shout! Have you finished?'

'Certainly not, Inspector! I haven't even started.'

'You know perfectly well that I never give interviews to newspapers, Mr Clarion.'

'This time, Mr Lisington, I'm afraid you'll have to; our readers are entitled to a statement. There are over two and a half million of them as you well know, and they won't be put off. They want Scotland Yard's views on the current rumours concerning a certain scandal.'

'What scandal are you referring to, Mr Clarion?'

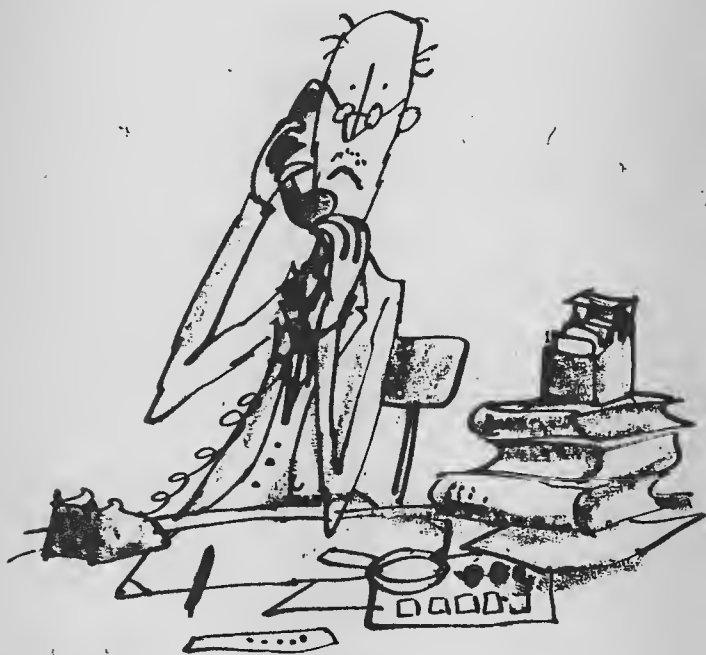
'Oh, there are several scandals, are there, Mr Lisington? Just a moment, I'll make a note of that... Inspector Lisington, when interviewed today by *The London Clarion* admitted that several scandals are worrying him at the moment...'

'What was that? Hallo! I didn't say anything of the sort! I never said a word about scandals!'

But surely, Mr Lispington, you won't deny that what is generally known as the London Potato Scandal is causing you a great deal of anxiety.'

'Of course I'll deny it. It doesn't worry me in the least.'

'You are not worried? Just a moment, I'll make a note of that too . . . Mr Lispington, though, went on to say that



he was not at all worried by the so-called London Potato Scandal . . .'

'This is outrageous, I . . .'

'Hang on, just let me get that down . . . but he did admit that the Potato Scandal is an outrage and he . . .'

'I said nothing of the sort, you twister!'

'I'm sorry, Mr Lispington. Then what did you say?'

'Nothing!'

'Can I quote you on that?'

'You certainly can.'

'Thank you, Mr Lispington.'

Inspector Lispington put down the receiver.

'These damned reporters can't catch me out,' he muttered to himself. 'Oh no, not me, I'm not such a fool as they think.'

Ten minutes later the phone rang again. He picked up the receiver.

'Hallo!'

'Inspector Lispington?'

'Speaking!'

'Good morning, Inspector. This is the government spokesman on police affairs. No doubt you recognize my voice?'

'I do, indeed I do, sir,' Lispington murmured apprehensively.

'Good. Now tell me everything that you know, Mr Lispington.'

'Everything that I know, sir?'

'Yes, everything.'

'About . . . about what, sir?'

'About what? About the London Potato Scandal, of course, what else?'

'But I . . . I know nothing about it sir!'

'You know nothing about it, Mr Lispington? Nothing at all? Then you must be the only person in London who doesn't. It's the talk of the town, and yet you tell me you know nothing about it?'

'Absolutely nothing, sir!'

'And it doesn't bother you? You don't feel any anxiety or disquiet? You don't think you, a senior police officer, ought to . . .'

'But really sir, I'm entirely ignorant of...'

'Ignorant! That's the word, Inspector Lispington! You took it right out of my mouth! Ignorant!'

With this furious outbreak, the government spokesman slammed the receiver down angrily.



Two hours later, at 16.18 precisely, the first copies of the second edition of *The Clarion* were on sale at street corners all over London. A banner headline across its front page caught the attention of passers-by eager to catch up with the latest developments in the notorious potato scandal.

POTATO PLOT THICKENS. SCOTLAND YARD IN THE SOUP

A Government spokesman in an interview with a *Clarion* reporter today, said: *This hot potato is too hot for us.*

Under these extraordinary headlines *The Clarion* printed a full account of its reporter's investigation into the matter:

For some time now people have been worried by rumours of what appears to be widespread fraud in the potato market. The rumours are persistent enough for the affair, known as the London Potato Scandal, to have become a talking point: new reports come in daily.

The Clarion, acting in the interests of its readers, started a full-scale investigation into the whole murky business. Our reporters, often at personal risk, discovered a great deal which at the proper time, we shall reveal.

What are the authorities doing to set the people's minds at rest? They have appointed Inspector Lispington of Scotland Yard to be the man in charge of the case. Or so they say. But is he really? When we asked him this morning how much he knew about it, he replied with what can only be described as pride: *Nothing! Absolutely nothing!* So we went along to a Government department and asked their spokesman: What do you know about the London Potato Scandal? *Nothing!* he replied, and seemed as proud of his ignorance as Mr Lispington had been.

Not to be put off, we went to another Government department and were given the following rather strange answer: *We never poke our noses into other people's soup.*

At yet another department our reporter spoke to the Minister himself. We report their conversation in full:

What do you know of the London Potato Scandal, Minister?
I say nothing about matters of which I know nothing.

Then, Minister, why do you say anything about anything?
I've often wondered.

Has it occurred to you, Minister, that the electorate must often wonder too?

Was that your last question?

Yes, sir.

Then I'll tell you a secret!

I'm listening, sir.

We, the Government, know a whole lot of things that we have no intention of repeating to your readers!

You do, do you? A whole lot of things, you say?

That's what I said, yes!

In that case, sir, you can bet that we'll find out what they are.

I don't doubt it for a moment. Here's one to start with. The Chancellor of the Exchequer will shortly announce a tax on ginger beer. 50p a bottle. What do you think of that, eh? Ha ha ha!

Now, we ask you, our readers, is this the sort of behaviour the British people expect of their elected representatives? We say the people deserve better government than this.

MORE SENSATIONAL REVELATIONS TOMORROW

Having finished his reading of this scurrilous article, Lisington pressed a yellow button on his desk.

His private secretary, Mr Lightfoot, slipped noiselessly into the room. 'You wanted me, sir?' he whispered.

'Yes, I did, Mr Lightfoot,' Lisington whispered back. 'Will you please bring me the contents of the secret file on that rotten potato business everybody seems to be talking about.'

'Certainly, sir,' breathed Mr Lightfoot, gliding from the room as silently as he had entered it.

A few minutes later he returned, and handed his superior a handsome green morocco portfolio. Lisington opened it.

'Would that be all, sir?' he whispered.

'Would it?'

'I think so, sir.'

'You mean this would be all?'

'All what, sir?'

'All we've got?'

'Yes, sir, on this particular case, the rotten potato case, that is. There's only one sheet of paper, sir, but I'm sure you will find it most interesting.' Mr Lightfoot's whisper sounded almost excited.

'Thank you, Lightfoot. I'll study it. That's all.'



Mr Lightfoot again slipped silently from the room, closing the door softly behind him. Lispington glanced round to make sure that he was alone and then took a single sheet of green paper out of the file. He went through it very carefully several times, chewing the nail on his right forefinger as he read:

Top Secret. Not to be handled by
unauthorised persons.

THE LONDON POTATO SCANDAL

A rotten business, if I'm not mistaken. The facts, as known to me at the present time, are as follows:

A vast enterprise, UNIVERSAL JUNK INC., recently authorised a full scale investigation of its accounts. The auditors noticed a number of payments which they could not understand. Over and over again large sums – up to £1,000 a time – had been paid to a firm called THE LONDON POTATO CO. LTD. Why should UNIVERSAL JUNK pay such large amounts to THE LONDON POTATO CO? The head cashier was suspected of having tampered with the books, but he insisted energetically that he was innocent, and nothing could be proved against him. That was in April. On 24th May, the Manager of UNITED STEAM ROLLERS LTD, suddenly found that similar payments had been made by his company to THE LONDON POTATO CO. LTD. In this case, too, suspicion fell on the head cashier, but again nothing could be proved. THE LONDON POTATO CO. LTD does not exist. It is a fictitious company, with a fictitious address and a bank account that is closed as soon as the required payments have been made.

What does it all mean? Who or what is behind the whole affair? Three questions must be answered. Who? How? Why? Could the word POTATO be an anagram? Some sort of pun. Or what about espionage? Something for the CIA? The work of an international gang?

London, 27th May, 20.15
Lispington

Slowly, Lispington let the brief secret report he had written

a few weeks ago fall back on to his desk. It was a very rotten case indeed.

'There must be more in it than potatoes,' he mused. 'It's a question of understanding how the so-called directors of this fake company get messages to each other. They must be using a complicated code or obscure language. And if that's what they're doing, then Agaton Sax is the man I need. He's fluent in all sorts of impossibly difficult languages, like Graelic, Cryptic, Melancholian, Brosnian, and so on – even Swedish! That's the answer, I must talk to Agaton Sax about this London Potato Co.'

No sooner said than done. In a few minutes he was on the phone to his old friend, Agaton Sax, editor-in-chief of Sweden's smallest – and best – newspaper, the *Bykoping Post*.

'Hallo,' said a decisive voice, clearly Agaton Sax's.

'Agaton? This is Lispington speaking. I'm almost desperate!'

'Are you? I'm sorry to hear that, Lispington. Is your Government angry with you again?'

'Probably. They're certainly beside themselves with rage. And it's all so unfair – just because of some rotten potato mess.'

'Did you say potato mash?'

'Mash or mess – it makes no difference to me, take your pick.'

'It certainly sounds most disagreeable. Tell me more.'

'All right. Are you listening?'

Lispington gave Agaton Sax a summary of the facts, then asked: 'Do the letters *p-o-t-a-t-o* mean anything to you?'

'Let me see . . . wait a minute . . . Let me think . . .'

Agaton Sax thought deeply. Finally he said: 'No. The only word I can make out of the letters is potato.'

'Yes, I know that,' said Lispington impatiently, 'but what does it mean?'

It means . . . well, you know what it means, Lispington! Money – big money – really big money!’

‘Of course I know that.’

‘Big money – and Crime.’

‘Yes, Agaton, I know that, too.’

‘Ah, but have you grasped the enormous possibilities of the incredible scheme you have just outlined to me? I tell you, Lispington, there must be a formidable brain behind these potatoes.’

‘A master-mind, you mean?’

‘Yes, Lispington! More than that, perhaps.’

‘More than a master-mind? What more could there be, Agaton? Explain, I beg you!’

‘I suspect Big Brother!’ whispered Agaton Sax.

‘Big Brother? Who’s he?’

‘Ah, if only I knew!’

‘If you don’t know who Big Brother is, Agaton, how can you suspect him?’

‘Everything points to Big Brother. An enterprise like this would need his methods, his genius, his brilliant audacity. Everything!’

‘But this is awful!’

‘You’re right, Lispington, it is awful, terrible, shocking!’

Lispington sat silent for a minute or two, almost as if his voice had wandered off and left him. At last he found it again and said: ‘What can we do Agaton?’

‘There’s only one thing, Lispington.’

‘What?’

‘Take action!’

‘Now?’

‘Yes, immediately.’

‘But I . . . I don’t understand . . . how can we . . .? I mean, we don’t know anything, do we – or do we?’

‘Everything will be all right, my dear Lispington, I’m

coming to join you, and I'll bring Clever Dick along. He is the only one who can tackle Big Brother. He – and another character, whose name modesty forbids me to mention,' Agaton Sax added with characteristic lack of modesty, carefully smoothing his elegant moustache.



Tapping the telephone

On the following morning, Agaton Sax was sitting in Inspector Lispington's office. The two great detectives were staring at each other in thoughtful silence.

'Well?' said Lispington at last.

'Well . . .' answered Agaton Sax. 'Do case the you Goat Beard mysterious of Old remember?' he went on, giving his friend a hard look.

'What?' exclaimed Lispington, alarmed by his colleague's strange words.

'Mean the don't that say to you you police remember double beard chief and with his goatee Brosnian a?' Agaton Sax continued relentlessly.

'Ah!' said Lispington, suddenly seeing the light. 'Beard Goat Old! Current and Yard's Criminals Scotland Code of Secret Register! Could how I forget! Ful-dread! Ful-aw! You beg I – disgraceful not case of remind that me do!'

'I'm afraid there is no alternative but to go over that case in great detail,' said Agaton Sax grimly. 'You remember the Boss and how he used double-talk to give orders to his

* *Double-talk* – To find out what Agaton Sax really said, rearrange the words in the right order, like this: 'Do you remember the mysterious case of Old Goat Beard? – You mean to say that you don't remember the Brosnian police chief and his double with a goatee beard? – Old Goat Beard! And Scotland Yard's Secret Code Register of Current Criminals. How could I forget! Dreadful! Awful! I beg you – do not remind me of that disgraceful case!'

For the 'disgraceful case' Lispington is referring to, see *Agaton Sax and the Scotland Yard Mystery*.

gang? There's no doubt, my dear Lispington, that we are up against the same Boss this time. The Boss and Big Brother.'

'Who on earth is Big Brother?'

'I'll tell you later. It's true, isn't it, that the Boss broke out of gaol some time ago?'

'Yes, unfortunately.'

'Well, Lispington, then it's our job to put him inside again. Don't you agree?'

'I suppose it is,' said Lispington despondently.

'Cheer up, old man!' Agaton Sax replied encouragingly. 'I've got an idea already. Let's start by tapping a few telephone lines.'

'Telephone lines?'

'That's it.'

'Why? Where?'

'Right at the heart of the spider's own web. We'll attack the Boss on his own ground.'

'Oh, dear me,' sighed Lispington, remembering how the false Goat Beard had kidnapped the genuine one (the Brosnian Police Chief) in the middle of the great International Police Conference in London, and stolen Scotland Yard's *Secret Code Register of Current Criminals*. Dreadful memories. He had no wish to cross swords with the Boss again.

'The first thing we must do is shave off our moustaches,' said Agaton Sax firmly.

'Why?' protested Lispington.

'Because we're going to disguise ourselves as telephone engineers.'

'Do you know where the Boss's hideout is?' asked Lispington, secretly hoping that the answer would be no.

'Of course I do! His headquarters are at 427B Duck Street. Fourth floor, first door on the left as you come out of the lift. Let's go, shall we?'

An hour later, thanks to the good relations Agaton Sax had always maintained with the G.P.O., two sets of engineers' overalls were delivered to Lisington's office, together with a complete tool kit and two pairs of headphones.

Having shaved and put on their uniforms, the two detectives got into one of the Post Office's dashing yellow vans. Agaton Sax drove at breakneck speed until they were just a few yards from 427B Duck Street, a big office block which, from the outside, had an air of great respectability.

'Look at that,' said Agaton Sax, pointing to an imposing board on the wall. Lisington read the following words, inscribed in gold lettering:

O. J. Bertram Ltd.
Restorers of Antique Houses
Competitive Prices
First Class Service

'First we'll have a word with the porter,' said Agaton Sax walking up to a red-faced man wearing a magnificent green uniform.

'What do you want?' said the porter roughly.

'Post Office engineers. We've come to check the telephone wiring. We've had several complaints of faulty instruments in the building, and there may be something wrong with the main cable.'

'Down the stairs, turn left along the corridor at the bottom and you'll see what you want,' said the porter, picking up the detective story he had been reading before they interrupted him.

They had no difficulty in finding what they were looking for. Agaton Sax gazed in silence at the one hundred and fourteen separate telephone wires curled neatly in their wooden box like sleek, sleeping snakes.

'Splendid. Couldn't be better,' he said. Then, a minute or two later. 'This is the one we want.'



He attacked the wire with a tool carefully selected from the kit they had brought with them, and in a few seconds he and Lispington, each wearing headphones, were listening anxiously for the first call.

There was a ring and someone picked up a receiver.

'Yes - hallo!'

'Is that you?'

'Ycs.'

'Good. 117 - 12 - 14 - 396.'

'That must be double-talk!' whispered Lispington, trembling with excitement.

'Sssh!' hissed Agaton Sax. 'I think it's a conversation in code!'

'412 - 19 - 36 - 87. £575.'

'£575!'

'Yes, why not?'

'You must be nuts!'

'No, I mean it. I'm not nuts! I'm putting on £575.'

'O.K. It's your money!'

Agaton Sax took off his headphones. He looked worried.

'I'm sorry, Lispington. I must have made a slight mistake. That was not the conversation I expected to hear. They were obviously discussing the bets they were going to place on today's runners. There's nothing criminal in that. Let's try another line.'

Another ring came. They listened as intently as before.

'Hallo! Is that the Wash White Laundry? It is, good. Now, you listen to me! I'm going to report you to the Board of Laundry Control, and this time you won't get away with it, I can assure you. When I've finished with you you'll have nothing but your own dirty linen to wash, nobody else will trust you.'

'May I ask to whom I am speaking, please?'

'You want to know who I am? Well, I'll tell you. I am one of your 14,500 dissatisfied customers, that's who I am! And my advice to you is that you should instal, as soon as you can, an automatic answer service to tell the 14,499 other people who are going to phone you that you sincerely regret what has happened, and that you offer full and prompt compensation for the clothes you have stained or damaged beyond repair. Will you do that?'

At this point the infuriated customer hung up. Agaton Sax cleared his throat, even more embarrassed than before.

'Sorry, Lispington,' he said, his cheeks flushing slightly. 'It's a pity I haven't got Clever Dick here. He would have selected the line we want straight away. Still, never say die. We must get the right one sooner or later.'

It took a few minutes, but he did it. Smiling happily, he whispered to his friend: 'This is it. Listen carefully, Lispington!'

They listened. This time there was no mistake. They were listening to the Boss's voice. If you only heard that voice once in your life, you could never forget it, its terrifying authority, its awful coldness.

'Where is B 14 to-day?' asked the Boss.

'Don't, sir, know I,' a halting voice answered at the other end.

'Stop that!' roared the Boss. 'How many times have I told you not to use double-talk over the phone? How many times?'

'Seventeen, sir.'

'Right! Then do as you're told and speak the Queen's English!'

'K.O. - Oh sorry, sir, O.K., I mean, sir. I saw B 14 at the Luna Amusement Park yesterday, sir.'

'At the Luna Amusement Park?' exploded the Boss. 'What the blazes was he doing there?'

'He was on one of the merry-go-round horses, sir. A yellow horse, sir.'

'On a merry-go-round horse?'

'Yes, sir. He told me that he got his ixtirpation from riding on the merry-go-round, sir. Is that the right word, sir? Or was it instriration he said? Anyhow, sir, whatever he got, he said he got it from sitting on one of those yellow horses, going round and round, sir.'

'Ixtirpation? Instriration? You ignorant blockhead – didn't you ever go to school? Why should the British Government and the Department of Education have spent precious money, and school teachers' time and lavished free medical attention on someone who doesn't even know the word *inspiration*! Repeat after me, you fool!'

'*You fool*, sir.'

'What did you . . . Oh, forget it!'

'Yes, sir. Whatever you say, sir.'

'Where is C 18?'

'He's gone to the football match, sir.'

'The football match? Which one? Arsenal-Leicester City? Tottenham Hotspur-Manchester United? Chelsea-Nottingham Forest? I want information! Accurate and detailed!'

'I don't know, I'm afraid, sir.'

The Boss seemed to be tearing his hair in despair. He drew in his breath, and it sounded like the hissing of a rattlesnake. Then, when he spoke again, his voice was ominously calm.

'You don't know . . . How do you expect me to run a great enterprise, when I have nothing but imbeciles, nincompoops and layabouts for assistants? Assistants did I say? I must have been joking. How can you expect me to accomplish anything really *important* – really *permanent* – really *impressive*, if my so-called assistants have no ambition, no discipline, no know-how? All my magnificent schemes come to nothing, because I have to trust them to a bunch of clumsy, dangerously stupid and rapacious hangers-on. Woe is me that ever I was born!'

Agaton Sax nodded agreement, his face serious. One could imagine the Boss bursting into tears as he reflected on his misery.

'You'd better ring off,' said the Boss, sighing heavily. 'I am disappointed in you – profoundly disappointed.'

The Boss hung up. For a few moments no one spoke. Lisington was shocked into silence by what he had heard.

'We must arrest him immediately – on the spot!' he whispered at last, his voice shaking with emotion.

'Definitely not!' said Agaton Sax.

'But he's an escaped convict, we have no choice.'

'I know. But we must solve the potato mystery before we arrest him.'

'It will be solved when we arrest him.'

'On the contrary,' said Agaton Sax, very sure of himself. 'We shan't do that unless we get the *whole* gang – the Boss himself, the departmental bosses, the deputies, everyone, right down to the messenger boy. And then there's Big Brother to be reckoned with. We don't even know where Big Brother is hiding.'

'Yes – where is he?' echoed Lisington. 'And *who* is he?' he added rather sharply.

'I know who he is, but I don't know yet where he is,' answered Agaton Sax. 'Don't worry, we'll trace him and hunt him down, all in good time. Shush – the Boss is making another call.'

Agaton Sax was right (as usual, he would have added). They heard the ringing tone, and then an evil voice at the other end.

'Hallo!'

'Deputy Boss A 2?' asked the Boss.

'Who wants to know?'

'I do. The Boss!'

'Sorry, sir. I didn't recognise your voice.'

'You didn't? Good! That's exactly what I intended.' The Boss sounded pleased. 'Any news?'

'No, sir, none. Well, yes, there is, actually, I forgot. £18 000 came in yesterday, sir.'

'In the usual way?'

'You could say so, sir – yes, you certainly could. Ha ha ha!'

'I don't see anything funny in that. Only a fool would think money was a laughing matter. Now, listen to me.'

'I'm all ears, sir!'

'There's a meeting of the Board to-day at 16.30. Got that? Good. Here, in my office. Summon the other deputies and all the members of the Board.'

'Very good, sir, I'll ring them now.'

'And get a move on!'

The Boss hung up with a brutal click. Agaton Sax nodded thoughtfully. Then he reminded Lispington of the Boss's ingenious system for maintaining secrecy. No member of the gang was allowed to know anyone else's real identity. The Boss knew every one, but no one knew the Boss. No one had ever seen him. He was a truly invisible man. He never appeared at any of their meetings, never showed himself to anyone. Even when in prison, he had succeeded in making everyone think he was someone else.

The Boss's voice, however, was known to every member of the gang. His voice spoke, unseen, from all sorts of strange and unexpected places. A cactus, for instance, standing on the board room table, a picture hanging on the wall, or the stopper of a decanter, or, sometimes even, from the leg of one of the board room chairs.

Tiny loud-speakers were concealed in these and other odd places, while the Boss himself sat in front of a microphone in another room, issuing orders to his confederates and assistants, with clockwork precision.

All the members of the gang were disguised, some as plumbers, decorators, or carpenter's apprentices; others as publicans, deputy managing directors, ice-cream vendors (in the summer), hot-chestnut sellers (in the winter). Still others masqueraded as coaches of fourth division soccer-teams, curates, cyclists, London bobbies, and so on. Nobody

was allowed to know the disguise of anyone else, and they all had to change professions three times a year, so that, in the course of one year, one and the same man might have to serve first as an aircraft maintenance engineer, then as a vicar, and finally as a book-maker.

'Disgusting!' exploded Lispington, when Agaton Sax had finished. 'He must be stopped before he has a chance to commit one more crime.'



'Yes, but not until after the board meeting,' insisted Agaton Sax. 'At that meeting, we'll learn many things that are now unknown to us. Shush! Here he is again.'

They heard the Boss's voice. This time he spoke to the girl on the switchboard.

'Will you get me *Curtains and Blinds*, please.'

'Very good, sir. I'll ring you back as soon as they are on the line.'

She dialled the number of that well-known West End firm. Just as someone in the firm's office picked up the receiver and was about to speak, Agaton Sax broke the Boss's connection and cut in.

'Hallo!' he said cheerfully, '*Curtains and Blinds* here. What can I do for you?'

'Hold the line a minute,' said the girl on the Boss's switchboard, 'Mr Bertram of O.S. Bertram, *Restorers of Antique Houses* wants to speak to you. You're through, sir,' she said to the Boss.

With growing astonishment, Lispington listened in on the conversation.

'Hallo!' said the Boss, 'I understand you repair blinds and other window coverings. Is that right?'

'We do indeed, sir!' said Agaton Sax adopting the tones of a deferential and persuasive salesman. 'We fix anything and everything here, sir. Always at your service, sir!'

'Good,' said the Boss. 'Then you can send along a couple of men to repair the blinds in my magnificent board-room. They need mending. It looks as if someone's been trying to tear them to pieces.'

'I understand, sir, things like that do happen from time to time, don't they?' said Agaton Sax, his voice oily with servility. 'And the address, sir?'

He got the address, and both parties hung up.

Agaton Sax was really pleased with himself. He beamed.

'Fantastic!' he whispered. 'This is our big chance. Now we can go right into the lion's den! Will you ring your colleagues at Scotland Yard and ask them to let us have the smallest and most powerful microphone and loudspeaker they've got.'

Just forty-five minutes later Agaton Sax and Lispington had changed again. They were now wearing smart yellow uniforms with *Curtains & Blinds* inscribed in red phosphorescent lettering on the pockets. They were carrying a selection of blinds, cords, screws, screwdrivers and other useful tools, and, hidden inside their uniforms, each one had a miniature microphone and loudspeaker.

Fully equipped, they had just fifteen minutes tuition from an expert, who instructed them in the skilled craft of

mending and repairing curtains and blinds, and they were ready to go.

'Remember,' said Agaton Sax as they left Scotland Yard, 'the Boss is sure to be spying on us through a hidden peephole in the wall while we're doing the job. So we've got to be twice as careful as we've been up to now.'

A secretary (Miss Rose Bloom, aged 23) was waiting for them when they arrived and introduced herself. She, of course, had no idea at all that *Restorers of Antique Houses*, where she had been working for a couple of weeks, was merely a front company launched by the Boss as a cover for his extensive criminal activities. Miss Bloom was busy all day typing letters to various clients who did not exist, never had existed – and never would exist, for that matter, about apparently honest business deals. She also opened some forty-five or so letters every day which were written, under false, innocent-sounding names, by various members of the gang. These letters, addressed to *Restorers of Antique Houses*, were designed to make the whole rotten business look like an honest enterprise offering a worthwhile service to the public.

'Sun's a bit too bright in here, isn't it, Miss?' observed Lisington cheerfully, as he and Agaton Sax entered Miss Bloom's office.

'Oh yes, I'm told it's far too hot in the summer, sometimes it's quite blinding,' Miss Bloom answered.

'I don't know about that, Miss Bloom, it must suit you, you look blooming,' said Lisington, winking at her. He was obviously trying to behave in a way that he thought would be typical of a blind repairer lucky enough to find himself in a pretty girl's office.

'How nice of you to say so!' said Miss Bloom, returning his wink with a friendly smile. But Agaton Sax, in no mood for frivolity, broke in sternly.

'I'm afraid this is not the room we are supposed to be working in. Let's get on with the job, shall we?'

He strode into the board-room, carefully measured the walls and the floor, and then, assisted by Lispington, repaired the blinds. The fifteen minutes of instruction they



had been given at Scotland Yard was enough to make them appear skilled tradesmen, and Agaton Sax had no difficulty in hiding the miniature microphone and transmitter which they had brought with them in the folds of a blind. They left no trace of wire on the carpet, nor did they drop any

cigarette ends. Within half an hour they were able to ask Miss Bloom to come in and inspect the work.

'Everything's O.K. now,' said Agaton Sax, 'they work perfectly.'

'Super!' said Miss Bloom admiringly.

'I thought you'd say that,' Lispington said complacently. 'No more sun to dazzle your eyes, *you'll* do the dazzling from now on, love!'

A disgraceful proposition

A few hours later, the two renowned detectives were sitting in a small room not far from the Boss's sumptuous board-room. They had persuaded another firm in the same building to let them have the use of the room, which happened to be empty for the afternoon since the man who usually worked there had left for Australia to attend his great-uncle's wedding.

Agaton Sax and Lispington were huddled over a minute loud-speaker which was connected to the microphones they had hidden in the board-room.

Lispington was on tenterhooks. As Agaton Sax glanced at his watch, Lispington rose and began to pace nervously up and down the little room.

'Suppose he slips out of the net under our very noses!' he said, stopping suddenly in the middle of the room. A drop of perspiration – cold sweat – glistened on his forehead, in which members of the British Government – and others – had dug so many deep furrows over the years.

'It's virtually impossible!' said Agaton Sax confidently. 'He'll soon be in the bag – he and the whole gang he bosses. All we've got to do is keep our heads and be cool as cucumbers until we've got him.'

They waited in silence. Then – suddenly – they heard a discreet knock on the door. Lispington jumped, but Agaton Sax put his finger to his lips as a signal to his friend not to make a sound. As a matter of fact, the knock they heard

was not on their own door at all, but came from the loudspeaker. It was somebody knocking on the board-room door.

Ten seconds later they heard the door open, followed by a few whispered words which they couldn't make out. Then all at once voices came clearly through the loudspeaker.

'Am blue in always I damned at these board a funk meetings,' said one voice.

'Up shut!' whispered the other. 'Might us he hear!' At this point several more people came into the room. There



was a noise of chair legs scraping the floor as the worthy members of the board took their seats at the polished oak table. But no one spoke.

Suddenly a harsh voice broke into the strained silence. It was the Boss, no doubt about that, nor about the fact that the voice came from the Chairman's gavel, a beautiful piece of work carved out of shining white ivory. The gavel lay at one end of the table – near the chair which, at any ordinary meeting, would be occupied by the chairman himself.

'Has everybody arrived?' asked the voice from the gavel coldly.

'Yes, we all here, sir, are,' answered one of the worthy members of the Board.

'A 2 B I 4 C 7 D 4 D 9 E 4.'

The words from the gavel whipped through the room like bullets from a pistol.

'All are here we!' chorused the members.

'Better you'd be,' murmured the gavel. 'To now me listen. Report our want financial an I on accurate position.'

'Sir, well very! In £ received we all have 000.09.' Dead silence followed this extraordinary statement.

Then, suddenly, the gavel roared: 'Chump you off are your?' Mean deuce by the what you do that?'

'Was in double figures talk I you giving the, sir.'

'Fool you! Report want an I accurate! Queen's in English forward-straight.'

'Of course, sir, sorry. United Steam Rollers have paid us £15,000; World Junk, United, £24,000; Amalgamated Socks £51,000.'

'Sir,' said another voice, 'I put five new pence in the church collection last Sunday, in order not to arouse suspicion, if you see what I mean, sir.'

'It'll be deducted from your salary,' the gavel snapped disagreeably. 'Is that all?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Now listen to me carefully. A grave danger is threatening us.'

Silence filled the room, in which the tension could be felt like an electric current. Then the gavel spoke again: '*Sax Agaton town in is!* Interrupt don't me! Thinks traitor that horrible fat swindling bully that unbearable that can conquer he me! Boss the - *me!* Ha ha!'

So great was the Boss's fear and hatred of Agaton Sax that, without thinking, he used double-talk when speaking of him. Suddenly everyone in the room was speaking at once. Anxious voices could be heard saying things like:

'Sir, sorry! Can't stay any I in longer job this! Mother is my ill very, and . . .'

'My auntie leg yesterday her broke, must and I care of take . . .'

'Sir, sorry awfully, telephone had just call a I before out went I, and . . .'

'It stop!' snapped the icy voice with complete authority. 'Every duty man is expected his do to! Won't cowardice any stand I!'

There was another moment's silence – tense, ominous – like the last one.

'Traitor mean, scum world the of, Sax Agaton! Must perish he! As as possible soon! New receive you orders will tomorrow. Closed meeting the is. Again meet shall at tomorrow we 16.00.'

There were a few muffled whispers – then the chairs were pushed back from the table, and the two detectives heard the men walking slowly from the room double-talking to each other in low voices.

'Excellent!' said Agaton Sax with a grim smile on his face. 'Are you ready, Lispington?'

'Ready?'

'Yes.'

'Ready for what?'

'For action!'

'I'm always ready! But what action? When? Where?'

'Now – right now! We must act at once, there is not a moment to lose. First, let's go to your office.'

They hurried away. As they entered Lispington's room, Agaton Sax sank into one of the visitors' chairs, and said:

'Do you happen to have any notepaper that doesn't carry the heading of your honourable institution? You do – good. Now let's see. I'm going to write a letter.'

'A letter? To whom?'

'To the Boss, of course!'

'About what?'

'About you.'

'About me?'

'Certainly, and about me.'

Agaton Sax sat down at the typewriter, which he pounded at terrific speed. Fifteen minutes later he showed Lispington what he had written.



Most Revered Boss,

Please forgive me for not writing to you immediately after you left your enforced seclusion three months ago. The fact is that I wanted to be sure, first of all, that you were – how shall I put it? – in full possession of all your famed criminal faculties before I contacted you. Now the moment has come. You are no longer in prison, and you have proved yourself to be as admirably competent a criminal as ever.

You know me by name, of course. My fame, though not comparable with yours, must have reached your ears.

I want to suggest that you and I should join forces. Naturally, I am aware that your powerful brain is at the moment fully occupied with the grand design which, in the world of crime, goes by the name of the London Potato Scandal, and I wish the enterprise every success. Do not think for a moment that I would want us to co-operate in that wonderful project; it is your brain-child, and I would not dream of interfering. My proposal is quite different: I suggest that you and I, in close and friendly co-operation, put a stop to the activities of that arch-traitor Agaton Sax. It is my sincere belief that only you and I together could possibly bring such a tremendous task to a successful conclusion. May we unite – may we go forward together and make a joint supreme effort to achieve that noble goal? Let us put aside petty squabbles, scorn selfish schemes and present a united front in order to crush, once and for all, that enemy of all decent crooks – Agaton Sax! Having accomplished our aim, we shall dominate the world of crime.

I suggest that we meet, and would like to bring with me my trusted right-hand man, Slim Snoop – a man of supreme intellect and with a heart of gold – a man without whose help I could never have achieved so much. Would it suit you if we came to your office at 10.00 tomorrow morning?

I await your answer eagerly. Please send it to the Post Office at 399 Mayfair Street, before 18.00 and I will collect it from there.

I remain, sir, your respectful, humble and obedient admirer.

Buck Pixman

Lispington sat silent for a while looking at the letter, then he put it down, wrung his hands and asked miserably:

'Good grief! What will happen if the police get hold of this letter?'

'They won't,' said Agaton Sax with conviction, 'I'll make sure of that. It would be far too risky. They would want to check up on all sorts of things first and cause all sorts of trouble and delay. No, we'll despatch this intriguing letter to the Boss at once and wait and see what he has to say.'

A Post Office messenger was sent with the letter. A few hours later they collected the reply from the Post Office. Agaton Sax tore it open impatiently and he and Lispington read the letter it contained.

Most Revered Mr Pixman,

Your letter, with its constructive suggestion, was, to say the least, most welcome. No task could be more important, more noble, more worthy of both of us, than the enterprise you suggest. I am 100% in favour of friendly co-operation. It is absolutely essential that we should put a stop, once and for all, to the war of nerves which Agaton Sax wages against all decent criminals. I shall be equally glad to meet your associate, Mr Slim Snoop.

The hour you suggest will suit me very well. I know you will forgive me if I remain invisible at our meeting. Invisibility is a matter of principle with me – *non videri sed essere*, or, in other words, *to be, not to be seen*, that is my motto. I can assure you it is a precaution I take in the common interest, and not from any selfish motives. It is a principle I stick to not in order to gain an advantage over my associates, but because I have proved that it works.

With best wishes for our partnership in crime,

I remain,

Yours obediently,

The Boss

'He's fallen straight into the trap like a sleep-walker!' said Lispington enthusiastically. 'This is terrific!'

'Yes, but we've a long way to go yet,' warned Agaton Sax thoughtfully. 'You and I will meet again to-morrow morning. Until then we must remain disguised, since the Boss has almost certainly got his spies out looking for us.'

On the following morning they met again, each disguised beyond recognition.

'Is that really you, Agaton?' exclaimed Lispington.

'At your service, Mr Snoop!' answered Agaton Sax with a little bow.

Agaton Sax wore a neat black beard and an elegant dark blue cloak. In his hand he carried a walking-stick in the handle of which he had secreted a miniature tape-recorder, a tiny microphone, an incredibly slim revolver, and a tear-gas pistol. Lispington was dressed in a yellow checked jacket and light blue trousers, and he was carrying an umbrella whose contents were much the same as those of Agaton Sax's walking-stick.

Thus armed, the two detectives took themselves off to one of the most important conferences in the history of international crime.

In truth – it might well be called *The Battle of the Brains*.

'What would be *your* terms, Mr Pixman?' said the table leg and the tone of its voice was just a little bit wary.

Agaton Sax was silent for a while. Then he said: 'The most important question is what do we do with Agaton Sax when we've caught him?'

The leg, in its turn, stood silent for a minute or two. Then it said: 'Ransom him. We ask Interpol for a ransom of £14 000 000.'

'A high price indeed, Mr Boss,' said Agaton Sax (his heart swelling with pride), 'do you think we'll get it?'

'Of course it's extremely high, I know. But remember, Mr Pixman, after a show-down of such magnitude, after a defeat so total, we'll hear no more of Mr Agaton Sax.'

'How do you mean Mr Boss?' said Agaton Sax (alias Mr Pixman), genuinely interested.

'Don't you see?' exclaimed the leg. 'Every minister of finance in Europe will . . .'

'Ah! I begin to see,' interrupted Agaton Sax.

'Exactly,' said the leg with a triumphant little laugh. 'They will join forces and forbid Agaton Sax to have anything to do with crime again. No European government, no minister of finance, can run the risk of having to pay out a share of £14 000 000 twice.'

'Yes, I guess you're right,' said Agaton Sax thoughtfully. 'So you don't think £14 000 000 would be too much to ask?'

'For Agaton Sax?' exclaimed the leg in utter amazement. 'Mr Pixman, you surprise me! Surely you must know who Agaton Sax is?'

'Of course I do. That's why I have come to you! He's an arch-traitor!'

'A shameless swindler,' declared the leg.

'A danger to all civilized criminals!' capped Agaton Sax.

'A cheeky twister!' joined in Lispington.

'Worse than that!' shouted the leg. 'He's disgusting! A fatty!'

'A preposterous boaster. A cheat and a bully!' This from Lispington.

'A treacherous serpent!' the leg responded.

'A picker of police brains,' declared Lispington.

Agaton Sax listened with mounting anger to all these insults – especially Lispington's last crack. But, realising that Lispington was only playing a part, he joined in.

'A creepy toad!'

'A Georgie-Porgie!' bawled the leg, and suddenly seemed to shake with laughter – a dispassionate, cold laugh which sent shivers down Lispington's spine, but not down that of Agaton Sax.

'Ha ha ha! Ho ho ho!' laughed the leg. 'Let me offer you a cigar, gentlemen. A really good cigar, worth every penny of £7. Genuine Havanna! Please, help yourselves! Just press the secret button you will find under the table top in front of you. The cigars are in a gold box in the secret drawer which slides out when you press the button! Ha ha ha!'

As the gruesome laughter died away, the two detectives, rather shaken by this strange interlude, heard the leg light a cigar of its own, pull at it with obvious enjoyment, then puff out what must have been a couple of elegant smoke-rings.

'Yes, indeed. Ha ha ha! Well now, that's that,' said the leg. 'Now, back to business. Agaton Sax has an associate, has he not?'

'An associate?' exclaimed Agaton Sax.

'Yes! A certain Inspector Klispington, or something like that,' the leg snarled.

'Oh, of course!' said Agaton Sax. 'You mean Lispington. A disagreeable little trickster I'd call him.'

'That's him. Unusually nasty even for a cop!' agreed the leg, puffing angrily at its cigar.

'But very alert, extremely clever – and terribly dangerous!' Lisington added hurriedly, two red spots showing on his cheeks. 'One of our most dangerous enemies!'

'Bah!' said the leg disparagingly. 'He's nothing to be afraid of!'

'I wouldn't say that!' said Lisington. 'Without him, Agaton Sax would cut a very poor figure!'

'Ha ha ha!' laughed the leg.

'I warn you, don't underestimate that man!' said Lisington.

'Bah! Now listen, Mr Snoop,' went on the leg. 'What ransom would *you* ask for Inspector Klisington?'

'The same as for Agaton Sax, of course,' said Lisington.

'That's a laugh! And you, Mr Pixman?'

'It's a very difficult question,' said Agaton Sax diplomatically. 'I haven't . . . worked it out yet.'

The leg was silent for a few minutes, apparently doing a few sums. After a while it said: 'I suppose we might get £14 000 for him. Better than nothing. Even small sums come in handy.'

'Just a minute, Mr Boss,' said Agaton Sax grimly. 'Remember that we're going to share whatever we get.'

The leg pulled deeply at its cigar.

'Hhmm,' it murmured. 'And just *how* would you suggest we split, Mr Pixman?'

'Sixty per cent to us and forty to you.'

'Ridiculous, Mr Pixman! You must be pulling my leg,' protested the leg. 'I never do business like that, I can assure you.'

'But I do, Mr Boss!'

The leg stood silent. Evidently it was making further calculations.

'O.K., Mr Pixman,' it said at last. 'How about equal shares. Fifty-fifty.'

'Suits me, Mr Boss,' said Agaton Sax. 'You're a sensible man.'

'Now that's agreed let's get down to brass-tacks, Mr Pixman,' said the leg energetically. 'What's your plan? How do we catch him?'

Agaton Sax made an eloquent little gesture.

'I have an extremely simple plan,' he said. 'As you know, Agaton Sax is in London, and every night this week he and Lispington have left Scotland Yard by car at 2.00 in the morning. They have then driven to a secret address near Hampstead Heath, where they meet representatives from Interpol to discuss strategy. Agaton Sax always drives the car himself. At exactly 2.04 they reach Hyde Park Corner.'

'Go on.'

The leg puffed furiously at its £7 cigar.

'Go on!' it reiterated, feverishly. 'I'm all ears.'

'The rest is merely a matter of routine,' went on Agaton Sax. 'As a rule, Hyde Park Corner is more or less deserted at that time of night. The day after to-morrow, you must post two men at the start of the northbound carriageway in Hyde Park. Have them disguised as traffic police. They will stop Agaton Sax and Lispington's car as it passes the Byron memorial, on the pretext of carrying out a traffic check. Then they will allow the car to proceed towards Marble Arch.'

'Why?' asked the leg.

'Because all you have to do at that point is to check that the two men in the car really are Agaton Sax and Lispington.'

'All right, go on.'

'When their car gets to Marble Arch it will turn up Edgware Road, where once again it will be stopped for a check by four of your men, again disguised as traffic police.'

They will be equipped with a walkie-talkie radio, so that by the time the car reaches them they will have received a message confirming that Agaton Sax and Lispington are in it. As soon as the car stops they will jump in, handcuff the occupants and drive to my secret address in Hampstead.'



'Your secret address?' asked the leg suspiciously.

'Yes,' said Agaton Sax. 'A house called Valley View.'

'All right. Go on.'

'I'll leave the address here, on top of you,' said Agaton Sax, allowing himself a little smile.

'What do you mean on top of me?' snarled the leg.

'On the table, just above the leg from which you are speaking. Now, when your men arrive at Valley View they

will find that you, the Boss, with four other men, are there to meet them.'

'Me?' exclaimed the leg.

'Yes.'

'That's impossible!'

'Impossible? Why?'

'Because I never visit anybody else's house,' answered the leg.

Agaton Sax and Lispington heard him puffing violently on his cigar.

'Too bad, Mr Boss. In that case I'm afraid we can't do business,' said Agaton Sax. 'I can't possibly negotiate with a table leg or a flowerpot.'

'A flowerpot?' exclaimed the leg indignantly. 'What the blazes do you mean by that?'

'I mean just what I say,' answered Agaton Sax indulging in yet another little smile. 'I know a good deal more about you than you think, Mr Boss. I know that you don't confine yourself to table legs, but have been known to communicate through flowerpots – a potted cactus for example.'

There was an ominous silence. Agaton Sax went on: 'Very well, I shan't be intractable. I accept your reluctance to meet me in person. As long as you send along five men, I don't mind if you aren't with them. You and I can talk things over later.'

'Perhaps. Now what's the password my men must use when they get to the house?'

'*Potato soup.*'

'O.K. Well, I'll see you later, Mr Pixman.'

'As you say, Mr Boss.'

The two detectives left the room. Lispington was beside himself, thrilled at the turn of events. He kept giving excited little bounds, for all the world as if he were trying to imitate the progress of a kangaroo across the room.

'Do you have to walk like that?' asked Agaton Sax rather testily.'

'Yes!' said Lispington firmly. 'It helps me think. Remember, Agaton, this is an extremely dangerous game we're playing.'

'No it's not. There will be six of us, you know.'

'Six?'

'Yes. You and me, Pixman and Snoop, and two others whose names we don't know yet.'

He explained his plan to Lispington, who grew more and more amazed as its boldness became apparent. At last he said: 'I'm with you, Agaton. I'm ready. I'm always ready.'

At 2.00 the following morning the two detectives left Scotland Yard by car and followed the route that Agaton Sax (alias Mr Pixman) had described to the Boss. They did this to show the Boss that Mr Pixman had been right about Agaton Sax and Lispington's nocturnal tours. And it was just as well they did, because they soon noticed that the Boss had posted spies along the route to check the truth of Agaton Sax's story.

But when, on the following night, their car left Scotland Yard at 2.00, Agaton Sax and Lispington were *not* sitting in it. Instead, there were two police officers specially picked because of their astonishing likeness to the two detectives. Some 1,475 police officers were inspected before these two had been selected. The choice was excellent. They could pass for Sax and Lispington anywhere.

The two genuine detectives had walked to Hyde Park Corner an hour earlier, where they intended to mingle with the Boss's accomplices disguised as policemen.

Two of the rogues were already waiting at Marble Arch. They looked quite smart in their police uniforms. Agaton Sax and Lispington strolled up to them.

'There are two more over there,' muttered Agaton Sax.

As they came up to the two men, Agaton Sax whispered hoarsely:

'Hallo, mate. Am B 4 I C 2 is he and. We're you here relieve to.'



'Relieve?'

'Yes. The from orders Boss.'

Agaton Sax produced a paper from one of his secret pockets and showed it to the two men, who read the following message:

To all those posted at Hyde Park Corner:

B 4 and C 2 will relieve the two men with the lowest numbers, who will go off duty until tomorrow morning. B 4 to take command.

The Boss

The two other men Agaton Sax had spotted now approached, curious to know what was going on. Agaton Sax showed them the letter.

'Which the have you lowest of numbers?' he asked.

'Me.'

'Me and.'

'Fine,' said Agaton Sax. 'Colleague and take will my I now over.'

The two men with the lowest numbers saluted and then walked away briskly.

Why had Agaton Sax said the lowest numbers? Because he did not know their numbers. The important thing was for him to get rid of two of them, while at the same time not letting on that he had no idea who was who.

'We go then here,' Agaton Sax said to the remaining men. 'Are ready you?'

'Sir, ready.'

'Fine.'

Scotland Yard's car swung round the corner into view. Agaton Sax stepped out into the street, waved it down, and said:

'Traffic check.'

The car stopped, and the driver peered out.

'Fantastic!' Agaton Sax murmured as he saw his double looking at him from the car window – the officer's likeness to him was really remarkable.

But there was no time for reflections of that kind. As quick as lightning he handcuffed the false Agaton Sax, while

the others did the same thing to the false Mr Lispington. The men in the car – who knew every detail of Agaton Sax's plan – pretended to protest, but they were immediately silenced by Agaton Sax, who put a warning finger to his lips.

Agaton Sax took the wheel. Twenty minutes later he stopped the car outside Valley View not far from Hampstead Heath. The house stood near a pond, over which fog hung in melancholy patches. The eerie hooting of a distant owl cut through the silence of the night. It was very dark. The trees seemed to stretch clutching fingers down to grasp the six men who walked slowly across the road to the garden of the house. First came Agaton Sax, then the two handcuffed policemen who were so like him and Lispington, then Lispington himself (dressed up as a villain in police uniform) and last the two real villains, also wearing police uniforms.

'Hideous Yard what Scotland uniform a dresses its in - cops,' one of them complained.

'Up shut!' commanded Agaton Sax severely.

They went through the gate. The house was a rather dilapidated one, which had been empty for such a long time that spider's webs hung down from above the door. Agaton Sax had rented the house for the sole purpose of trapping the Boss.

He unlocked the door and as the six men went in, switched on the light. They entered a large room in which stood a colossal safe. A giant elk's head hung on the wall above the safe.

'Sit all down!' commanded Agaton Sax.

They sat down. Outside the wind stirred the twisted boughs, and the rustling of the leaves seemed to carry dread and doom through the night.

'That was what?' one of the crooks said suddenly.

'What about you talking are?'

'Ran floor across somebody the upstairs.'

'Ran somebody?'

They listened. A 17 and B 16 were as white as sheets. Then they heard it again.

'Must house the be haunted!' exclaimed A 17.

'Sticks fiddle!' said Agaton Sax contemptuously. 'Don't exist ghosts. No ever has ghost one seen a. Must it rats you have been heard.'



Two more minutes passed. Lispington shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

Suddenly a piercing shriek shattered the silence.

'Help! Get the ghosts us will!' yelled B 16.

'Hopeless you numskull!' exclaimed Agaton Sax.

The shriek was heard again – and the next second a blinding light flashed through the trees in the garden.

'Car that's Boss's the more five with men,' said Agaton

Sax, crossing to the door, where he listened carefully to the rapid footsteps on the gravel outside. Then there was a knock on the door.

'There who's? Pass the you do word know?'

'*Soup potato!*'



'Fool you!' hissed Agaton Sax indignantly. 'Change into can't word double you talk the pass, ass silly you!'

He opened the door, and five men wearing greenish bowler hats entered the room in some confusion.

'Am A 2 I,' said the tallest of them.

'Am B 4 I, said Agaton Sax. 'From instructions you the have Boss?'

'Sure! We Slim and Pixman Snoop must night keep whole up here the locked.'

'Fine. Are and Pixman Snoop already caught,' Agaton Sax said. 'Have cops Yard from Scotland also we two the.'

What was going to happen now? Lispington did not know for certain. What he did know was that he did not like it - he did not like it at all. And he would tell Agaton so.



Lispington had been staring at the huge elk's head on the wall for some time. It hung crooked and irritated him. He did not like it. It looked to him as if the elk suspected something and had turned his head on one side in order to get a better look at what was going on.

'Damn it all!' Lispington murmured between his teeth. 'Double damnation! I don't like it!'

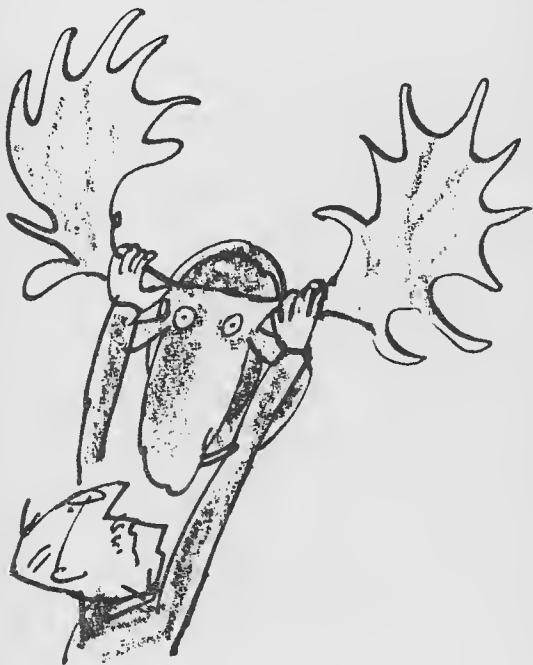
'Is you what it that like don't?' asked Agaton Sax sharply.

Lispington did not care to answer. He was in a bad temper, and it was three o'clock in the morning. He crossed one leg over the other and bit his lip.

'Damn it all!' he muttered again. 'I can't stand that stare of his.'

He could bear it no longer. He stood up, and everyone in the room stared at him. But Lispington took no notice.

He wouldn't put up with it. He wouldn't put up with being stared at suspiciously by an elk.



He went up to the safe, climbed on to it, and gripped the elk's magnificent horns with both hands in an attempt to straighten the head.

That firm grip proved to be Lispington's undoing in the case of the London potato scandal.

The elk's head came away from the wall, and toppled into Lispington's arms. Lispington, in his turn, staggered

under the heavy weight, fell from the safe and did a couple of somersaults across the floor with the head between his arms, firmly coming to rest near the door.

Everyone leapt to his feet.

At the same moment, a clatter was heard as a round metal object rolled across the floor. It described a wide circle then spun round like a top for about half a minute, before finally coming to rest with a defiant clang.

Twenty-two eyes, eleven pairs, stared in fascination at the metal object. Everyone in the room seemed mesmerised by it.

Then A 2 crossed the room, bent down, and picked it up.

He lifted it to his nose, as if he were going to sniff it.

'Know do what you? Scotland elk that cop from Yard is a!'

He was holding Lisington's police badge in his hand.

The hideout at Valley View

Before the two detectives had time to realise what had happened, A 2 roared:

'Hands of all you up!'

Two revolvers pointed menacingly, one at Agaton Sax and one at Lisington.

Slowly they raised their arms. A 2 handed over one of his revolvers to a colleague and said: 'Boss-call I'll the.'

He went to the telephone, and dialled a number. He heard the ringing tone, then the Boss's cold voice, heavy with sleep.

'Hallo! Who's speaking?'

'A 2 here,'

'Speak!'

'Sir, the elk's head fell on to the floor and . . .'

'The elk's head?'

'Yes, sir, the elk's head.'

'Are you raving mad?'

'No, sir. The policeman's badge rolled across the floor and . . .'

'Policeman's badge? Elk's head? This is sheer madness. Drunkenness while on duty is severely punished, you know that. Let me speak to A 3.'

A 2's cheeks blazed, but he did not dare to defy the Boss, even over the phone. He handed the receiver to A 3.

'Hallo, this is A 3. It's all right, sir, he's quite sober.'

'How do you know that? Are you sure you're sober yourself?'

'Yes, sir. I swear I am. This is what happened. The policeman's badge didn't fall out of the elk's head, sir, but from the policeman's pocket.'

'You drunken loggerheads! What on earth are you talking about?'

'Well, you see he climbed up on top of the safe here, and then . . .'

'He? Who is he? Where?'

'Here, sir, at Valley View. He, the double-crossing cop that is, got up on to the safe, and then he and the elk's head came tumbling down – like London Bridge, sir, and then this policeman's badge fell out of the elk's head – no it didn't sir, sorry, it fell out of the cop's pocket, and I picked it up, sir, and we don't know what to do next. What do you think we ought to do, sir?'

'You impossible idiot, what cop are you talking about? And what elk's head?'

'It hangs on the wall, sir, or rather it used to hang there, but now it's on the floor, sir. They were the . . .'

'They?'

'Yes, they were the two chaps who came to relieve A 17 and B 16 at Hyde Park Corner on your orders, sir, B 4 and C 2.'

'Relieve? Did they say relieve?'

The Boss was silent for a minute or two. He realized that events had taken an entirely unexpected turn and that they had suffered a nasty body blow below the belt. But he kept his admirable presence of mind, and said calmly, 'Just a minute, A 3. Remember my motto: *Be suspicious!* I've got my secret register here, which lists all my accomplices, giving their names, income, description and so on. Now, let me see, here we are. You tell me that one of the two men alleges that he's B 4, and the other one that he's C 2 – is that right? Let's start with B 4. Height? Six feet three inches. Is that correct?'

'Oh no, sir.'

'Has he brown, rather bloodshot eyes?'

'Oh no, sir. On the contrary!'

'Hm! Well we'll leave him for the moment. Now what about C 2? Height: five feet two inches. Is that right do you think?'

'Oh no, sir, it couldn't possibly be. Of course we can measure him, sir, but I don't think I'm wrong sir, he can't be as short as that, sir.'

'I see. Is he rather rotund? Perhaps fattish?'

'Oh no, sir. I wouldn't say that at all.'

'Aha . . . Has he got a birthmark the size of a small parsnip behind his right ear?'

'I'll have a look, sir.'

In spite of Lispington's indignant protests, A 3 had a look behind the Inspector's ear.

'Did you say behind the right ear, sir? No, there's nothing like a parsnip there, sir, nor behind the left ear. But it *might* be the other way round, sir.'

'The other way round? How? What difference does it make which way round you look at a parsnip, you fool!'

'I'm sorry, sir, I don't know. But what I was thinking was that maybe they had changed their names, sir.'

'Changed their names? What will you think of next?'

'Well, sir, B 4 is small and fat – a little podge you could say. And C 2 is tall, very tall.'

'Has the tall one got bloodshot eyes? Has the fat one a birthmark the size of a small parsnip?'

'No, sir.'

'Well then! You blockhead! Don't talk about things you know nothing about.'

The Boss lit a late night cigar.

'It's all quite clear to me now,' he said. 'The two men

you're talking about are cops in disguise. Now listen to me. Are you listening or have you gone to sleep?'

'I'm all ears, sir.'

'Now this is the situation. You have, in your power, the two policemen in disguise and the detectives from Scotland Yard who were in the car. Two and two make four policemen in all - right? Lock all four of them up - but be careful, for at least one is extremely dangerous!'

'I see, sir.'

'Right. I'll be along within the hour.'

A 3 hung up. He turned to Agaton Sax with a wicked smile.

'That's that then,' he said triumphantly. 'Off we go! All four of you! I'm sure we can find a couple of rooms that will do you nicely.'

With revolvers in their backs, Agaton Sax, Lispington and the two police officers were frog-marched upstairs.

Since this is a true story and the truth is often so complicated it is hard to follow, we had better remind our readers, at this point, of what had happened. Agaton Sax and Lispington had disguised themselves as crooks wearing police uniforms. None of their companions knew who they really were. If the crooks had had an inkling that one of the men was Agaton Sax, they would probably have fainted, and the whole story would have ended very tamely. The Boss (now on his way to the house) knew that the two policemen (Agaton Sax and Lispington) were *not* B 4 and C 2. But he did *not* know yet that they were Agaton Sax and Lispington. On the other hand, he was certainly expecting to find Sax and Lispington under lock and key in the Hampstead house, since he thought that they had been in the hi-jacked Scotland Yard car.

On the first floor, there was a long corridor going from one end of the house to the other. A 3, leading the procession, opened two of the doors leading off the corridor.

Agaton Sax and Lispington were ushered into one of the rooms, and the two police officers who were disguised as Agaton Sax and Lispington were taken to another one. In each of the rooms, two crooks, armed with revolvers, stood guard over their prisoners.

Agaton Sax had not said a single word since Lispington's fatal fall. We have a whole hour at our disposal, he thought to himself. That will be plenty of time for me to work something out.

He looked around. They were in a bedroom with a magnificent double-bed. The window was locked. A big mirror hung on the wall over the dressing-table.

'Well well,' said F 3, a small, thin fellow with a drooping moustache. 'Now we can take it easy. You, the little fat one, sit down in the chair by the dressing-table, and you, Mr Tallboy, you sit down over by the window. That's it. And don't try any funny business on me.'

'That's exactly what I was going to say,' said A 12, a hefty chap with sandy-coloured, honest eyes and a burnt out cigar stub drooping permanently from the corner of his mouth.

Revolvers on their knees, the two crooks sat on chairs just inside the door.

'This won't be easy,' thought Lispington to himself. 'I can't for the life of me think what to do. What a fool I've been. We should have arrested them straightaway. The Chancellor of the Exchequer will have to ransom Agaton and me, and that will be dreadfully costly, terribly expensive. And what will the tax-payers say? Oh dear, oh dear . . .'

'I'm sorry for Lispington,' thought Agaton Sax. 'He's worried. He needn't be, though. Nor need the Chancellor of the Exchequer be either. I still have a full hour at my disposal.'

Five minutes passed in silence. A 12 yawned, for it was

very late – or rather very early. F 3 looked at him reproachfully.

‘Sleeping here no,’ he said. ‘The remember ransom! ‘We’ll get each £1 047.’

‘£1 047? Is true that?’

‘Certainly. It I myself heard meeting at a secret night last.’

‘Swell that’s! I’ll new a buy cap. One twelve old this is years.’

‘That can see I.’

There was another silence lasting about three minutes.

Then, suddenly, a strange noise was heard coming from the direction of the window. The crook jumped. F 3 looked threateningly at Lispington, and shouted:

‘Stop that, will you?’

Lispington stared back at him.

‘Stop what, you twister?’ he asked angrily.

‘That! Rocking your chair like that all the time!’

‘Am I rocking? I’m not rocking, you fool!’ protested Lispington.

‘Oh, so you aren’t rocking! You sound as if you were sitting there rocking and rocking a rotten old green rocking chair that looks like something out of the Stone Age!’ shouted F 3.

Now the sound came again. It sounded exactly as if it came from a rocking-chair – whether green or red it would be impossible to say, but a real rocking-chair.

But Lispington was *not* rocking his chair. He was sitting absolutely motionless, and his cheeks were beginning to burn with anger.

The sound was distinct enough, though. Rock-rock-rock-rock.

‘Stop it, I tell you, you insolent cop!’

‘How the blazes can I stop when I haven’t even started!’ Lispington shouted back at him.

F 3 leapt to his feet. He ran across to Lispington and stood over him, brandishing his revolver in his right hand. The sound went on. But to his dismay he saw that Lispington was speaking the truth. The detective was not rocking his chair!

'What's going on?' he shouted, terrified.

At the same moment, another sound came from behind his back. F 3 swung round.

It was a yell – an eerie, piercing, icy yell that chilled the crooks to the marrow.

'What are you yelling for?' shouted F 3 to A 12, who had jumped to his feet as he heard the yell.

'I'm not yelling! It was out there! In the corridor.' They listened. The ghastly noise was heard again, and it sent cold shivers down the spines of at least three of the men in the room.

'Don't be afraid,' said Agaton Sax calmly. 'It's only an owl.'

'An owl? In the corridor?' shouted F 3, rushing to the door.

'Hallo! You out there! Who's there? Answer me!'

But there was nothing in the corridor except silence and darkness. F 3 stared into the darkness, his teeth beginning to chatter.

Then they heard the yell again. F 3 managed to switch on an electric torch with trembling fingers and its light flooded the corridor. There was absolutely nothing there except a spider's web.

He and A 12 mopped the sweat from their foreheads. F 3 came back into the room and locked the door. Lispington sat in his chair, silent and motionless. He understood nothing. Everyone must be mad, that was certain.

F 3 chewed at a cigarette end. He stared furtively round as if looking for ghosts. Suddenly he started, as did the others.

There was a gentle knock at the door – as if some very

feeble old man were trying to make himself heard by tapping with an uncertain forefinger.

'There who's? Knocking who's?'

Silence again. Then they heard the knocking once more, and this time it seemed that the decrepit old man had been replaced by someone else – a big, hefty chap in the prime of life – knocking not with a weak, timid fore-finger, but with solid knuckles, or even a clenched fist.

F 3 slowly turned the key in the lock.

He opened the door, and he and A 12 pointed their revolvers angrily down the corridor, at the same time flooding it with light from their torches.

But there was no one there.

They came back into the room and F 3 locked the door again. Now he and his friend were both trembling in every limb. While they stood there, shaking helplessly, there came a new noise, a kind of rattling sound.

'Are teeth chattering your?' whispered F 3 hoarsely to his friend.

'Aren't mine! Are but somebody's. Whose?' F 3 swung round and confronted Agaton Sax and Lispington, brandishing his revolver in their faces. 'Don't you try any of your dirty tricks on me,' he shouted. 'Stop pretending your teeth are chattering.'

But in his heart of hearts he knew very well that his prisoners' teeth were not chattering. No, it was . . . it was . . . What was it? The truth was too horrible to contemplate. He put his hand over his aching eyes. If the very thought of it had not been too terrifying to admit, he would have sworn that he had just seen the small yellow rug by the dressing-table move slowly an inch or two towards the door.

But there was no time to indulge in fantasies, for the next moment something really did happen.

An oil painting of a lake with a boat and a duck on it, and two houses in the background hung on the wall. It was a scene of great beauty and serenity, which made the shock of hearing a harsh voice coming from it even greater. F3 and A12 almost collapsed on the floor, as the voice ordered, in grating tones:



'Nonsense this all stop! Boss is the speaking this! You me hear can?'

'Sir, yes!'

'Good. Carefully listen. Have got revolvers you?'

'Sir, yes. Us of both.'

'Good. On them the put floor.'

'Floor put them the on?'

The two crooks had gone deathly white. They exchanged terrified glances, then turned back to the painting.

'Did, sir, hear aright we?'

'You yes did! Move a get on!'

Dazed, they glanced hopelessly at each other once more, then laid their revolvers on the floor.

'Good. Backwards now towards walk wall the. There stop!'

They obeyed in terror and stood with their backs to the wall.

'Betide you woe if don't you obey! At unmasked you last are, traitors you!'

'Unmasked?'

Yes! Have through I double seen your dealing! This remember: Boss everything the knows! Men who the two call B 4 C 2 and themselves – in still room they are the?'

'Sir, yes.'

'Good. They at least are not traitors! They are loyal. B 4! Pick up the revolvers – both of them.'

Agaton Sax walked calmly across the room and picked up the revolvers.

'Have you got them?' asked the Boss. 'Good! Now, lock up those two traitors.'

Lispington had been watching carefully, and listening with the greatest amazement to all that had been said. Now he stared fearfully at Agaton Sax, who, calmly pointing his two weapons at the trembling crooks, said coldly,

‘Gentlemen. I’m leaving you for a couple of minutes. Lisington, take the revolvers, will you, and keep an eye on these two, while I release our friends from Scotland Yard. I shan’t be a minute.’

Lisington took over, and Agaton Sax walked out of the room.

Of course, it was Agaton Sax who had produced all the noises that had terrified the crooks and finally caused them to surrender. It was he who had creaked like an old rocking-chair, hooted like an owl, knocked at the door and finally spoken in the Boss’s voice out of the oil painting. One of his most remarkable gifts is for ventriloquism. As you know, a ventriloquist is a person who, speaking from the inside of a barrel, can sound as if he were outside it – and *vice versa*.

But there are only one or two ventriloquists in the whole world who can produce knocking at doors, the creakings of rocking chairs, the screeching of owls. Furthermore, Agaton Sax mimics other people’s voices so brilliantly that he can fool grandmothers, even mothers, into thinking that they are listening to their grandchildren or even children.

A confusion of bosses

Agaton Sax knew exactly where to find the two genuine police officers from Scotland Yard. (They were the two, you remember, who bore a striking resemblance to himself and Lispington.)

He crept along the dark corridor. A feeble light came through the window, and he realised it must be almost dawn. Outside in the garden the first birds were chirping in the trees.

Outside the door of the room he waited, he stopped and listened. There was a deep silence. He looked at his bullet-proof watch. It was a quarter to four.

At this moment the Boss was speeding through the dark and empty streets of London in his Rolls Royce. Within half an hour, perhaps within twenty minutes, he would be here.

Agaton Sax had his plan ready. It was a good plan, brave, daring, some might even say foolhardy.

Slowly he lifted his right hand and knocked at the door.

He heard a sound inside. Somebody got up from a chair, walked across to the door and listened with his ear to the key-hole.

He knocked again.

'There who's?'

'F 3. O. everything K. room in your?'

'K. everything O.'

'Good,' said Agaton Sax (who was speaking in F 3's voice). 'Out can one come you of? Careful but be! Have the new Boss orders from I.'

The door opened slowly. One of the crooks came out. Agaton Sax, pressed against the wall, thrust his revolver into the small of the crook's back, then, quick as lightning, snatched his weapon from his hand. Shutting the door he whispered: 'Shush! Not a word! I am Agaton Sax!'

The man obeyed, terrified as he heard the dreaded name. Agaton Sax pushed him along the corridor to the room he had just left. He opened the door, handed the man over to Lispington, and whispered: 'Here's another one! I'll be back soon.'

Then he tiptoed back to the other room again. Putting his ear to the key-hole, he listened intently, but there wasn't a sound. He knocked at the door, the remaining crook came out, was disarmed in the same manner as his friend, handcuffed, and marched along the corridor to Lispington. Then he freed the two police officers. Within the space of a few minutes, Agaton Sax had contrived to set free his two colleagues and lock up four crooks. But there were another three still at large somewhere in the house. The Boss would be arriving at any minute, and he would certainly not come alone.

Before we proceed, a few words must be said about the Boss. He was a man of unusual daring and intelligence, who, some four years earlier, had achieved fame in his chosen career, and with it a degree of power that meant he was in command of virtually the whole underworld. He had then formed a powerful company, CRIME DOES PAY LTD, whose board meetings were notorious for the incredible sums paid over to the directors at each session. All the company's profits were distributed to the share-holders in genuine money, it never handled counterfeit notes.

But that Company, a gilt-edged security if ever there was one, was blown apart by Agaton Sax, and the Boss and all his directors sent to prison.

A couple of years later, the Boss managed to escape from prison. Within less than a year he had formed a new company – just as dangerous to society as the first one. A series of coups was carried out with a mixture of brilliant planning and cold-blooded audacity, and now he was master-minding what was known all over the capital as the London Potato Scandal – as impenetrably mysterious, as daring and shocking as all his other enterprises. Rumours of his exploits gave rise to forebodings in financial circles in many a Western European capital and anxious speculation at the stock-exchanges of London, Paris, and Brussels was a clear warning of growing unrest. Everybody had heard of the mysterious Potato Scandal, but nobody really knew what it was all about. The most fantastic theories shook the criminal world and the upper echelons of the police force alike. No one felt secure any more.

Only Agaton Sax fully realized what was happening now and what was likely to happen in the future. Soon the rumours about the London Potato Scandal would cease, and be replaced in thousands of prosperous firms and expanding companies by whisperings about the Beer Barrel Mystery, the Ginger Ale Scandal, the Tin Can Case, and so on. If the Boss were to have his way, uncertainty would become the constant companion of Big Business.

Quickly, Agaton Sax checked the things he had hidden in his pockets. A miniature microphone, a miniature loudspeaker, a couple of transistorized amplifiers, and some twenty yards of fine flex.

He gave Lisington careful instructions, then, aided by the police officers, he concealed his various pieces of equipment in the most suitable places. The loudspeaker was hidden over one of the windows in the entrance hall, with its flex (carefully kept out of sight) leading to a large wardrobe, the door of which was covered by a red curtain.

Agaton Sax was certain that the Boss would assemble the crooks in the entrance hall, he himself remaining hidden in a small room leading off it, from where he would issue his terrible orders through his own loudspeaker.

Agaton Sax crept downstairs. A 2 and his two confederates, A 17 and B 16, were sitting in the drawing-room. He saw them, bolt upright on their chairs, listening intently and waiting patiently. They were ready to jump to their feet as soon as the Boss arrived.

Agaton Sax, Lispington and the two police officers stole into the wardrobe. A couple of electric torches gave them sufficient light.

They waited for fourteen minutes.

Then, suddenly, a shrill whistle split the silence. The men in the wardrobe looked at each other.

'The Boss is coming,' whispered Agaton Sax.

They listened. The three crooks in the drawing-room knew what to do. The whistle meant that while no one was allowed to attempt to see the Boss, everyone must be ready to receive his orders. Where would the orders come from? That they did not know yet.

A few minutes passed. The Boss was setting up his microphone and loudspeaker in some secret place.

A metallic voice pierced the silence:

'All assemble crooks! Entrance the hall in!'

Agaton Sax heard the three men hurry into the hall, where they took up their posts by the door, ready to listen. The voice came again:

'Under everything is control?'

'Sir, everything!' answered A 2 with a triumphant smile. 'Pixman Mr Snoop and Slim four the and police room officers in the up locked are in upstairs.'

'Fine - cellent-ex!' rapped the voice.

The Boss believed that both Agaton Sax and Lispington

had been captured, together with Mr Pixman and his associate, Slim Snoop. But he had never dared to tell the crooks he had entrusted with the mission that it was Agaton Sax they were after, for if he had they would have refused point blank to have anything to do with the matter.

But no sooner had the Boss received A 2's brief report than Agaton Sax bent over his microphone. In a voice that no one in the world could have distinguished from that of the Boss, he called out:

'Beware! Listen to me! *The voice you heard just now was that of a traitor! I warn you! I am the Boss!*'

You could almost hear the Boss turn white. This was absolutely unexpected, incredible. But Agaton Sax went on relentlessly: Don't believe anything that man says! He's a police spy! Seize him!

'Wait! Listen to me! Listen to me, you silly asses!'

The Boss was so agitated that he forgot to use double-talk. Agaton Sax had anticipated this and so hadn't used it himself.

'Don't listen to him,' he went on. Then cleverly switched suddenly to double-talk. 'Must you he that understand cop is a – how speak to he even doesn't double know talk.'

'Treason!' shouted the Boss furiously. 'In there's a the traitor house! Him catch!'

'Can if you, yes!' said Agaton Sax triumphantly. 'Am the I Boss! Have house this in been the I time whole. Have doings been I all the following your time! Excellent are crooks you – *I double from your salaries now!*'

'*I treble them!*' countered the Boss.

'Bluffing he's – can tell that you, you can't?' said Agaton Sax contemptuously.

'Don't to listen him!' howled the Boss. 'He wants to cheat us all out of £14 014 000! He's shameless this Mr Pixman – a disgrace to the whole criminal world.'

'Now you listen to me, all of you!' shouted Agaton Sax in such a terrifying voice that even the Boss winced. 'Remember that we have Big Brother on our side. Big Brother the master-mind of crime, the matchless genius – the super-brain who can solve all problems. Big Brother, the sensation of the century, who can send thousands and thousands of thousand-pound notes fluttering like autumn leaves into our open cash-boxes!'

The Boss staggered, cold-sweat broke out on his brow, his voice faltered, he choked, the very blood in his veins seemed to freeze as he heard the last terrible words, pronounced by that daring madman who, invisible but audible, had the colossal impertinence to challenge his authority. He, the Boss.

At this point something totally unexpected happened.

There was a loud knock at the door.

'Open up! Police!' ordered a powerful voice.

Agaton Sax and the Boss interrupted their heated argument over the loud-speakers. Lispington shot an enquiring glance at his Swedish friend, who slowly stroked his moustache, as he was accustomed to do in an embarrassing situation.

'Extremely inopportune, I must say,' he murmured.

'We can't go and let them in, can we?' whispered Lispington hopefully.

'For heaven's sake no! We mustn't get the police mixed up in this! We can't arrest the Boss yet, it's far too early, it will spoil everything,' whispered Agaton Sax earnestly. 'We must . . . we must get rid of these two police officers – I'm sure there are only two of them.'

He was right. The two officers outside the door looked at each other then firmly pushed open the door and entered the hall with grim, determined faces.

But the hall was empty. Again they looked at each other, then one of them scratched his ear.

'What about upstairs?' he said.

'There were no lights upstairs.'

'But we *heard* them, didn't we?'

'We certainly did – two hooligans bawling at each other.'

'Ah, wait a minute! It must have been the telly!'

'Can't have been – there was no shooting.'

'I guess you're right. Then it must have been the radio!'

'Quite likely. But where's the radio?'

They made a quick inspection of all the rooms on the ground floor. All the radios they found were switched off. They went upstairs and inspected all the rooms that were unlocked. Then, returning to the hall, they looked at each other again.

'A mystery, eh?'

'Could it have been a car radio?'

'Here? In the house?'

'Stupid! A car parked in the drive, I mean.'

'Come to think of it, there were three empty cars parked in the road when we arrived.'

'But there was no car radio on in any of them.'

'Right.'

They went out into the garden through the back door.

'No car. No tyre tracks.'

Suddenly they heard an engine start. They rushed to the gate, too late to see anything but a cloud of dust behind a car that shot out on to the road at terrific speed. And then another one following the first at the same tremendous pace.

One of the officers jumped into their own car, but the other held him back, saying:

'It's no good. We don't stand a chance of catching them. Besides, you can't follow people who haven't done anything wrong.'

'Ah, but I suspect they have!'

'What, for example?'

'Well . . . you heard them, didn't you?'

The other shrugged his shoulders, and they turned back into the hall.

Suddenly, one of them strode deliberately over to the wardrobe door. He rattled the handle and, finding the door locked, pulled a knife from one of his pockets and inserted it in the key-hole.

'Aha!' he said triumphantly.

'What is it?'

'The key!'

'What about the key? I don't see any key!'

'No - that's just it! The key is on the *inside!*'

'On the inside? But then . . .?'

The first man stared at his colleague in sudden terror as he realised what he had said.

'That's what I mean. There's somebody inside! Come out of there!' he shouted. 'We're police officers. We know you're hiding there!'

A long silence followed his words. It was broken by the faint clicking of a key being turned in the lock. Then the door opened slowly, and a tall, thin gentleman with a furious expression on his face, stepped out.

'Well, sir?' said the police officer, staring fixedly at the tall gentleman. 'Can you give a satisfactory explanation for your presence in this cupboard?'

'Explanation!' exploded the gentleman. 'Treading you in here come and spoiling on clumsy everything with feet your!' he went on, shaking his fist at the police officers.

'I warn you!' Don't try to talk yourself out of this with incoherent babble!' retorted the police officer, no less angry.

'We are the police,' said the tall gentleman.

You! *We* are the police!'

Then two more men emerged from the large wardrobe. A brief and rather painful conversation followed.

Wiping his forehead as the two police officers withdrew, Lispington said:

‘Double damn! What are we going to do now?’

‘It’s all very simple,’ said Agaton Sax, quite unperturbed. ‘In half an hour, I shall telephone the Boss.’

Lispington protests

Half an hour later, Agaton Sax dialled the Boss's number, and, after a few moments, heard the familiar spine-chilling voice:

'Hallo!'

'Is that the Boss speaking?' asked Agaton Sax in Mr Pixman's voice.

'The Boss?' said the voice suspiciously. 'What do you want, you oaf? How dare you wake people up in the middle of the night! I've a good mind to report you to the police!'

'A-a-aha!' said Agaton Sax with a little smile. 'Innocent the you try to needn't play me with, Boss Mr. This is Mr Pixman speaking - P-i-x-m-a-n.'

'And what do *you* want, may I ask, Mr Pixman?'

The voice seemed to blow a biting, frozen wind down the telephone - creating an atmosphere so frightening that it was almost paralysing - frightening enough to paralyse almost everybody - but not Agaton Sax.

'What do I want? Surely you know that, Mr Boss!'

'Don't mumble into your false beard, speak up, you lousy scoundrel!' answered the frozen wind.

'With pleasure,' said Mr Pixman affably. 'We were to meet, you and I, weren't we?'

There was silence at the other end.

'Surely you must remember,' went on Mr Pixman smoothly. 'Why were we to meet, you and I? Don't you remember? Of course you do, Mr Boss! But you never turned up!'

'It was you who never turned up, Mr Pixman!' snarled the Boss.

'Of course I did.'

'You didn't! Don't try to put your dirty lies across me, Mr Pixman! I went to the house. My men went to the house, too. But you never showed up. You had the incredible cheek to send along a policeman who mimicked my voice! That was what *you* did, Mr Pixman! I'm warning you for the last time! You are a repulsive little cockroach, a miserable mosquito, a mere fly, Mr Pixman, and I'm going to crush you – like *this*!'

'Aha?' said Agaton Sax, raising his eyebrow. 'Aha? A mere fly, you said? But suppose we try to recollect what really happened at the house, Mr Boss? I tipped you off about Agaton Sax and Lispington. Your men had the task of catching them. So they did. They brought Agaton Sax and Lispington to the house. My assistant Slim Snoop and I were to be there waiting for them, and you, Mr Boss, were to arrive a little later, to meet us. Then we were going to ask a substantial ransom for Agaton Sax and Lispington. Is that correct? You agree so far? Right. But what actually happened? Your men took the two detectives to the house in Hampstead as arranged, and you, also as arranged, came to the house. But *why* did you come? You didn't come as a loyal, honest colleague – you came as the vile traitor that you are. You planned to seize for your own selfish ends Agaton Sax and Lispington, together with Slim Snoop and me. That was your plan! Unfortunately, I arrived five minutes too late for it to work. Do you know why Mr Boss? Of course you know! It was because one of your dishonest underlings had let the air out of my nearside rear tyre! Why? Well, it's as clear as daylight isn't it? You planned to make a getaway with Agaton Sax and Lispington, and then demand and keep the whole ransom for yourself! That's

the disgusting truth, isn't it? A fine friend you've proved to be!

Agaton Sax heard the Boss breathing hard at the other end. Then his voice snapped back:

'You're beneath contempt aren't you, Mr Pixman? A germ? What really happened in that house? You know as well as I do. My men were posted at Hyde Park Corner to see that everything was on the level, cards on the table and no double-dealing. Then what happened? Two of your rotten associates approached my men, pretending to be my men, saying they had orders to relieve two of my guards – which they proceeded to do. What a mean trick! What degrading treachery! They then took Agaton Sax and Lispington prisoner and whisked them to the Hampstead house. Why? What was your plan, Mr Pixman? You think I can't see through it? Well, I can! You planned to take *me* prisoner as well, Mr Pixman, and then ask an enormous ransom for *the three of us* – myself, Agaton Sax, and Lispington! That was your plan, you cringing little worm! But you failed! You haven't the guts of a rabbit and when the police turned up unexpectedly you bolted, taking Agaton Sax and Lispington with you. Mr Pixman – you are the vilest, meanest and most dishonourable crook I've ever come across. You are a disgrace to the whole criminal world, to our noble profession!

Agaton Sax was puffing contentedly at his cigar as he listened to this storm of abuse. Lispington leaned against him so as to hear what the Boss was saying and his face was growing more crimson with anger at every word. He stamped his foot impatiently.

'We must arrest him!' he whispered urgently over and over again. But Agaton Sax waved him aside.

'Well, Mr Pixman – do you confess? Am I right to accuse you?' asked the Boss coldly.

'Confess?' said Mr Pixman nonchalantly.

'Yes! Do you admit that you have Agaton Sax and Lispington?'



'Mr Boss,' said Agaton Sax in a voice that was at one and the same time calm and full of menace. 'What if I do have Agaton Sax? And what if I do have Lispington?'

'Well?'

'What if I do? How much would you be prepared to pay for them?'

'Pay for them? What do you mean, pay for them, you scoundrel?' roared the Boss.

mean exactly what I say,' insisted Mr Pixman's voice.

The man at the other end seemed to be making a quick calculation. He muttered a few figures and ten seconds later said in a briskly business-like voice, 'I'll give you three and a half million for the pair.'

This was an insolent and humiliating suggestion. Agaton Sax alone was worth much much more.

A little smile, dangerous and slightly bitter, played on Agaton Sax's lips. When he answered his tone was patronising.

'I realise you're joking, Mr Boss. But unfortunately I have no time to waste in jesting. My time is far too precious. You see, in a few minutes, I'm going to call Scotland Yard.'

'Scotland Yard?'

'Naturally.'

There was an ominous silence. Then the Boss said: 'Why?' 'Guess!'

'You are trying to insult me, Mr Pixman! I warn you, if I wanted to I could give you the names of some twenty people who have insulted me. Their moments of triumph cost them dear, about £11 475 000 if I remember right.'

'I've already said, I'm in a hurry,' replied Mr Pixman, unmoved by the Boss's threats. 'As a matter of fact, you are quite right. I do have both Agaton Sax and Lispington in safe keeping here. Name the price you're willing to pay for them – a realistic figure – but do it quickly, for other customers are waiting!'

'You're selling, Mr Pixman! It's for you to tell me what your price is!'

'£14 000 000.'

'You must be off your nut, Mr Pixman! But just suppose I would consider doing business with you, in spite of the fact that you are off your nut – how soon could you deliver the goods?'

'At 17.00 the day after tomorrow.'

'Where?'

'The same place – Valley View.'

'O.K. But I warn you, Mr Pixman – no tricks! What are your plans for handing over the goods?'

'And what are yours for handing over the money, Mr Boss?'

'According to good business practice and sound common sense,' replied the icy voice, 'delivery and payment must be simultaneous. O.K.?'

'O.K. I suggest the following arrangement, Mr Boss. On the first floor there are four rooms leading off a corridor.'

'Is that where you've got my four men locked up?'

'No, Mr Boss. They're in the basement.'

'I want them back. And no ransom, mind.'

'O.K., O.K. They can be delivered within the hour, don't worry. But you interrupted me, Mr Boss. May I suggest that the day after tomorrow, at precisely 17.00 you, Mr Boss, or alternately four of your men go to Valley View and make your way straight to the first room along the upstairs corridor. Go in. You will find Agaton Sax and Lispington there, padlocked and chained to an iron bed in the middle of the room. Having satisfied yourself that they are there for you to take, you will hide the £14 000 000 in one of the rooms, or in the corridor. Before you arrive I shall have hidden the key to the padlock which secures your detective friends to the iron bedstead. Are you following me?'

'Go on!'

'Having hidden the pound notes, which must be done by 17.10 you will go back to Agaton Sax and Lispington. At 17.11 you will hear a voice.'

'Where from?'

'From a loud-speaker in the corridor.'

'Whose voice?'

'Mine. I will tell you where the key is hidden, and you will tell me, in a loud, clear voice, where the bank notes are hidden. Do you follow me?'

'Go on!'

'You will fetch the key, and I shall fetch the money. You will free the detectives from their chains, handcuff them, and leave the house with your precious goods. In the meantime, I shall count the bank notes and check that they are genuine. If they aren't . . '

'What will you do about it? Greedy, aren't you?'

'If they aren't genuine, it doesn't need much imagination to guess what will happen, does it Mr Boss?'

Lispington, who had been listening intently to this conversation, now began pacing agitatedly up and down the room.

'Damn it!' he said as Agaton Sax hung up. 'Why all this hush-hush stuff? It's damned risky!'

'Risky?'

'Yes, of course it is! I don't want to be chained to some damned iron bedstead in that damned house! This is no good, Agaton! You could ruin my reputation. Modern police forces don't go in for this sort of hole and corner stuff. Nor do modern criminals! An iron bedstead! Chains! Padlocks! Damn it all!'

'But my dear Lispington,' said Agaton Sax kindly, 'everything I have suggested is absolutely necessary! It will provide the evidence we need to solve the case of the London Potato Scandal. Don't forget that, please.'

'But why the blazes don't we have that man arrested now? After all, he has kidnapped you and me! Surely that's enough to convict him!'

'Believe me, Lispington, I know what I'm doing. As always. We must have sufficient evidence against Big Brother before we can strike.'

'Big Brother: I *demand* to know whose confounded brother that man is!' insisted Lispington. He was so indignant he was shouting.

'I promise you,' said Agaton Sax soothingly, 'as soon as we've had a few hours' sleep, we'll tackle Big Brother.'

Mr Blimp's dilemma

We must now leave the two master detectives enjoying their well-earned sleep and direct our attention to the distressing events which had taken place, only a few hours earlier, in the Board room of that well-known and reputable company, *Prill's Pastilles Ltd.*

Who has not heard of Prill's Pastilles – what they are – what they stand for – what they are good for? Who has not cured his sore throat, restored his voice, stifled his cold, by sucking Prill's Pastilles? How many opera singers, or pop singers for that matter, would be able to sing one single note on occasions, unless they had first taken a Prill's Pastille? Who has not, in the Sahara's towering sand dunes, in the tropics' burning heat, in the chaos of the big City, restored his spirits by taking a PP?

Anyone who was watching the seven solemn gentlemen at the Board Room table on this particular morning, would have felt tempted to cheer them up by reminding them of their company's world-famous slogan: *For Pity's Sake – Have a Prill's!*

It was quite evident that none of them had sucked a Prill's Pastille recently, for there were dark shadows under their eyes, and thin faces, normally shining with well-fed complacency, were dark with worry.

The company's President, Sir Jonathan, a splendid-looking, grey-haired gentleman of about sixty, banged his gavel on the table, and declared the meeting open.

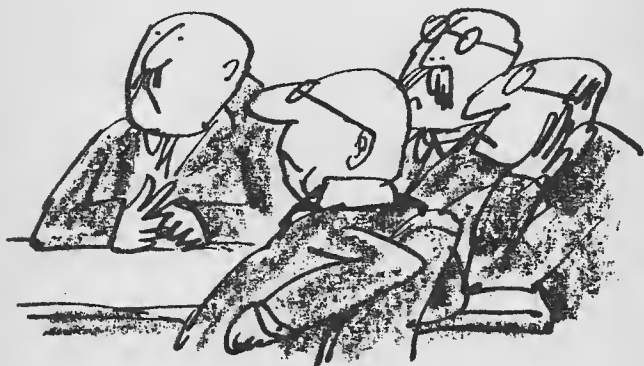
'Gentlemen,' he announced solemnly, 'you all have knowledge of the circumstances which have caused me to call this extraordinary meeting of the Board. There is only one item on our agenda: the strange events which have recently taken place in our accounts department.'



Sir Jonathan paused. A heavy silence followed his words, words which could be interpreted in only one way. Money had disappeared.

Sir Jonathan glanced sternly at each member of the Board in turn in order to emphasize the gravity of the situation. Then, blowing his nose loudly, he went on: 'You will certainly have heard rumours of the so-called London Potato Scandal; You will almost equally certainly have shrugged your shoulders and dismissed them as idle gossip. Even if

you felt inclined to believe them, you will have thought, as people do when bad luck strikes others, this could not happen to us. Having thus reassured yourselves, you will have turned your attention to the everyday cares and worries that beset the directors of a great company such as ours. But, gentlemen, you will have been wrong. This time we



are concerned! You – we – I – Prill's Pastilles – we are all concerned, deeply concerned!

The six gentlemen, immaculately dressed in their dark city suits, cowered under the blows that Sir Jonathan's words dealt them, and shrank deeper into their chairs.

'Yes, gentlemen! This is a fatal hour for Prill's Pastilles! All that we have believed in – worked for – dreamt of – all the love and care we have devoted to promoting the interests of our proud Company – can we allow all this to perish,

to be crumbled like a slice of bread between the thumb and forefinger of some ferocious giant?’

He blew his nose again, almost overwhelmed by the effect his own words had created. However, slipping a Prill's Pastille into his mouth, he seemed to hear an inner voice whispering: *Take Courage.*

Clearing his throat, he went on: ‘Will the Managing Director please rise and give an account of the facts which have so far come to light in this distressing affair.’

Mr Blimp (aged fifty) also cleared his throat. He was a rather plump man, whose healthy appearance was normally an excellent advertisement for Prill's Pastilles. But at this moment he would have been no use to his sales manager. He was a worried looking man.

‘Mr President, gentlemen,’ he said, pulling nervously at the middle finger of his right hand, as if he were for some reason trying to tear it off. ‘Four weeks ago, my chief accountant came to see me. He was very upset. He told me that large sums of money had been paid out to a company that did not exist! I was incredulous and asked him what on earth he meant. The rest of our conversation I will repeat to you exactly as it took place:

“‘Mr Blimp,” he said, “the truth is that on four occasions recently we’ve paid sums amounting to £120 000 in all into a certain bank account. Yesterday we learned that this bank account no longer exists. It had been closed as soon as our fourth payment had been paid in. The money should never have gone into that account. In other words, we have paid £120 000 to somebody who had no right to it, but who took it, cashed our cheques, then closed the account and vanished into thin air!”

““But this is sheer madness!” I said to the head cashier.

““Yes, Mr Blimp, that’s the least that can be said,” he answered.

““But the bank account, it must have been in some company’s name?”

““Of course, Mr Blimp!”

““What name then?”

““*The London Potato Co. Ltd*, Mr Blimp.”

““Potato?”

““Yes, Mr. Blimp. Sounds ordinary enough, doesn’t it?”

‘I was petrified,’ Mr Blimp went on, clearing his throat nervously as he recalled that terrible moment. ‘I paced the room, too agitated to think clearly.’

““But in Heaven’s name,” I asked the chief accountant, “who authorised the payment of these sums? How could such a thing happen? Do you think one of our employees paid the money into some non-existent company’s bank account and then cashed the money himself using a false name?”

““That, Mr Blimp, is not as far-fetched as you might think,” the chief accountant replied. “As a matter of fact, that was the explanation I myself thought at first was the most likely one. But alas, Mr Blimp, the situation is far worse even than that!”

““You’re frightening me! What could be worse than one of our own employees . . .”

““Mr Blimp . . . I . . . It’s so . . . I . . .”

““Speak up, man!”

““Well, Mr Blimp, you see, the truth is that it was not an employee but our own computer that paid the £120 000 to the firm that doesn’t exist!”

““Our own computer? Mr Click, consider what you’re saying,” I told him. “A computer is not capable of writing out cheques, is it?”

““No, Mr Blimp,” he replied, wiping his forehead. “As far as I know the computer that could do that has not yet been invented. And yet it *has* happened.”

““But how? For goodness’ sake explain yourself. How did this happen?” I demanded.

““Well, as you know, we pay out, on an average, £4 173 every day. Some of this goes to the firms who deliver the raw material we use in our excellent pastilles, some to the factory that makes our packets, some to the agency that handles our advertising and some to the firms who distribute our goods. A small amount is needed for discontented customers who claim their money back since it is our proud boast that no customer of ours shall pay for something he doesn’t like; the kind of routine payments made by any company. As you know, the procedure for each payment is that we ask our bank to send such and such a sum to such and such a firm or customer. The accounts department feeds the computer with all the facts it needs – names, addresses, amounts and so forth. For example, if we owe *World Syrup Ltd* £1 000, we inform the computer which in its turn records the fact, and numerous others of a similar nature. It takes about a quarter – or perhaps half a second to classify the information and send it on to the appropriate places, among them the various branches of our bank. It never fails. But in this instance something quite extraordinary happened. The computer was told to record a payment for *World Syrup Ltd*, instead it credited it to *The London Potato Co. Ltd*, or rather to the account of that non-existent company. Then, swiftly and surely, the crooks who had set up this fictitious company collected the money. They did this four times – then closed the account, and vanished.”

Mr Blimp paused. He had explained everything as it had been explained to him by Mr Click. He had been heard in gloomy silence.

‘And then?’ asked Sir Jonathan his expression grim.

‘Then,’ said Mr Blimp, ‘the irregular transactions were discovered by one of my assistants, who checked up after

receiving several angry calls from *World Syrup Ltd.* They are, as you know, a reputable firm and were naturally impatient as promised payments had not arrived.'

'And the banks? They just paid the money to the account opened in the name of *The London Potato Co. Ltd?*'

'That's correct.'

'Appalling! And then, Mr Blimp?'

'Well, sir, as soon as we discovered this dreadful swindle, we sent out a general alarm to every branch of the bank. They immediately investigated the matter, and were soon forced to admit that *The London Potato Co. Ltd*, didn't exist. But the men behind it – the men who had collected the money from the branches, they existed all right!'

'How horrible! What did you do next?'

'We made a thorough investigation into the whole affair, Sir Jonathan. The only explanation we can think of is that someone in our company – a ruthless, unscrupulous, treacherous individual – fed the computer with false information.'

'Meaning what?'

'Meaning, sir, that he instructed the computer to credit the money to *The London Potato Co.* and not to *World Syrup.*'

'I can't believe it!'

The eight members of the board wiped their foreheads, and Mr Blimp again tugged so vigorously at his middle finger that it seemed he must pull it off. Sir Jonathan looked daggers at him and said:

'Are you sure this can't happen again, Mr Blimp?'

'Absolutely sure, sir. I check every single payment personally now. I check that every company on our list, every firm and every individual customer really exists. There was, for example, a Mr Sycamore Toodlependington whose name seemed to me to be rather strange, so I checked

up on him, and he certainly existed. Then I found a *Mr Betsy Penelope Whatshername*, and I thought that . . .’

‘Never mind what you thought, Mr Blimp, I think we’ve heard about enough,’ said Sir Jonathan disagreeably. He banged his gavel on the table again, and went on: ‘Gentlemen, you now know the facts of this sorry business, may I have your opinions please!’

Questions were hurled at Mr Blimp, followed rapidly by a veritable hail-storm of suggestions. Computer experts from outside must be called in – the whole matter must be reported to the police – a committee of investigation within the firm must be appointed – Mr Blimp must be suspended from duty for at least a fortnight pending enquiries, and so on and so on.

Finally Sir Jonathan said: ‘I have a suggestion to make. We don’t go to the police. We go to Mr Agaton Sax.’

The Board sat silent. Everybody looked at Sir Jonathan. Then someone said:

‘And who is Agaton Stax?’

‘Agaton Sax is a Swedish private detective with an outstanding reputation.’

Then the questioning started again:

‘A foreigner?’

‘What can *he* do about it?’

‘We don’t want some damned foreigner poking his nose into our business!’

‘Is he an expert on computers?’

‘What does he know about conditions in the pastille industry in Great Britain at the present time?’

‘The name doesn’t inspire me with confidence!’

‘I’ve never heard of him!’

‘I’m definitely against it! Let’s go to Scotland Yard!’

Sir Jonathan was unmoved. He had already made up his mind.

But Mr Blimp was not unmoved, far from it. At the mention of Scotland Yard he began to tremble uncontrollably and pull once again at his unhappy middle finger.

The awful truth was that Mr Blimp definitely did not want anybody – least of all Scotland Yard – to start poking their noses into his accounts.

‘Gentlemen,’ said Sir Jonathan forcefully, lifting the receiver of the conference table telephone. ‘I’m now about



to dial a number. Whom shall I ring? Shall I ring Scotland Yard and report this shameful mess to them? Oh no! That I will never do!’

He dialled a number. The members of the Board looked at each other in amazement. An operator at Scotland Yard answered.

‘Good morning, this is Sir Jonathan, President of Prill’s Pastilles Ltd. Can I speak to the Commissioner of Police, please?’

'Hold on a minute, Sir Jonathan, I'll see if I can find him for you.'

A moment later Sir Jonathan spoke again:

'Hallo! Is that the Commissioner?'

'Speaking.'

'This is Sir Jonathan, of Prill's Pastilles Ltd. You must be familiar with them. I would like to hand over the pastilles - I beg your pardon, I mean the receiver - to our Vice-President, Mr Jo hua Nuts. He is very anxious to know something which only you can tell him. Would you be so kind as to oblige him?'

'Nuts here. May I take the liberty of enquiring if you know of a certain person called Agaton Strax?'

'No, but I think you must mean Agaton Sax. If that's who you mean, I know him.'

'That's the one. Well, what do you think of him?'

'What do I think of him? What an extraordinary question, my dear Mr Nuts. Agaton Sax is the tops.'

'What do you mean by 'the tops', Commissioner?'

'I mean everything, sir. He is super! A super detective, unflappable, impossible to outwit - a super-sleuth in every way.'

'Thank you, Commissioner, you've been most helpful.'

Mr Nuts hung up, and repeated to the others what the Commissioner of Scotland Yard had told him. The Board now had no trouble in agreeing with Sir Jonathan that their man was Agaton Sax. They would call him at once.

That is why, an hour later, a man in a dark, well-cut business suit, with a grim expression on his face, got out of a car outside the hotel where Agaton Sax was staying.

He looked round cautiously, as if he were afraid of being ambushed. Then he walked into the hotel lobby and slowly crossed the shining marble floor. At that moment he could have done with a Prill's Pastille!

As he approached the reception desk, he stopped, his heart beating wildly. But he pulled himself together and went up to the receptionist.

'Can I speak to Mr Agaton Sax, please?'

'Just a minute, sir.'

What torture waiting was! The operator rang several times, but there was no reply. A flicker of hope warmed the faint heart of the neatly dressed gentleman.

'Sorry sir, there's no reply from his room, and the key is here. Do you want me to try the restaurant?'

'Oh no, that's not necessary!' the gentleman answered quickly.

The gentleman in question was none other than Mr Blimp. The members of the Board had told him to contact Agaton Sax with all speed, give him the facts, and ask him please to investigate this disagreeable case of forgery.

One thought only kept going round and round in Mr Blimp's bewildered brain as he made his way to Agaton Sax's hotel: A super-sleuth was going to go through his accounts! The thought sent him into a cold sweat. His legs almost refused to hold him up.

That was why he had come to a stop in the hotel lobby, unable to go on for a moment. That was why his heart began to beat so hopefully when he heard that Agaton Sax was out. He must gain time – he had to think things over – he had to have an hour's grace. Only an hour. That would be enough.

And now there was a chance that he might have several hours before Agaton Sax returned to the hotel.

He got into his car and started the engine, driving aimlessly up one street and down another. He wanted to think, to find a solution, but his thoughts became more and more confused.

He did not notice that another car was following him.

It was a small sports car which had been parked for several hours opposite the hotel entrance, and in it was a lady. She had been waiting for hours, silent, motionless, watchful. As Mr Blimp entered the hotel lobby, she had pressed a small button on the dashboard, put an earphone in her ear and listened to all that was being said in the lobby. When Mr Blimp came out, she followed his car.

Mr Blimp pulled up outside a café. He got out of his car, went in and ordered a cup of coffee. Then he wiped his forehead, and again tried to relax. Suddenly he was alert. An elderly lady was approaching his table. Without a word she took a chair and sat down opposite him. He stared at her angrily. She stared back.

'You are Mr Pixman, I presume,' said the lady after a while. She sounded particularly hostile.

'No, I'm not,' answered Mr Blimp truthfully, adding scornfully: 'And you, madame, you are Mrs Grundy, I presume.'

'Indeed I'm not,' said the lady coldly. 'You'd better not try to be funny with me, Mr Pixman.'

The veins on Mr Blimp's forehead stood out. Who was this disturbing person?

'Would you have the goodness to get out of my sight?' he asked in a voice that was choked with anger.

'No,' said the lady quite unperturbed by this rudeness.

'No? Do you want me to throw you out?'

'You can try if you like, Mr Pixman.'

'Or would you prefer me to call the police and have you removed from this café which I had the misfortune to enter - in the vain hope that I could have a cup of coffee without being harassed by peculiar persons unknown to me. And stop calling me Mr Pixman, will you?'

'You said the police, Mr Pixman?'

'I did! That's what I said! I'll call the police!'

He swung round furiously, looking as if he were about to call the waitress:

'Miss! Can you fetch a policeman, please – two would be even better.'

But the unknown lady was quicker. She forestalled him and went on inexorably:

'You are not going to call the police, Mr Pixman. You wouldn't dare – and you know it.'

Mr Blimp felt a lump in his throat. He tried to swallow it.

'I am here to warn you, Mr Pixman,' said the lady.

'To warn me? What about? Who about?'

'About yourself, Mr Pixman, and about what you are planning to do!'

'You're talking in riddles,' retorted Mr Blimp, trying to sound offhand. 'I suggest you go back where you came from.'

'I shan't do that,' answered the lady, 'because I've come to talk to you about Agaton Sax.'

Mr Blimp turned pale.

'Agaton Sax?' he stammered. 'Who's he?'

'You know very well who he is, Mr Pixman, since you just asked to see him at his hotel.'

'Well, who are you then?' asked Mr Blimp hoarsely.

'Wouldn't you like to know? Now, have I made myself clear? Don't get Agaton Sax mixed up in this mess whatever you do, do you understand? And don't dare try to contact him again – is that understood?'

Confused thoughts chased each other round Mr Blimp's brain. Then suddenly everything was crystal clear. Of course! He glanced furtively around, making sure that he could not be overheard. Then he whispered urgently.

'So it's you who's been tampering with our computer, is it?'

'Don't try to be funny. I've got better things to do than tamper with your confuser. If I'm not mistaken you're the one who's been tampering, Mr Pixman!'

This was a shattering accusation, but Mr Blimp's nerve did not desert him. Although he was so gripped with fear that he could hardly speak, he managed to reply with dignity, 'I've no more time to waste on you, please go away.'

'Remember what I've said. Don't get Agaton Sax mixed up in this! If you do, you'll hear from me and from Scotland Yard!'

With this threat the lady rose from her chair and walked away.

But if Mr Blimp thought that he had got the better of her and could relax he was profoundly mistaken. He left the café and got into his car to drive back to the office. As he drew away from the kerb he glanced in the rear mirror and saw the lady in the sports car, still following him.

By the time he got back to his office, he was in such an agitated state of mind that his trembling right forefinger could barely manage to dial the number of Sir Jonathan's extension. When he did get through he told Sir Jonathan that he hoped to be in touch with Agaton Sax within the hour.

That done, Mr Blimp sank back in his chair. Frightening questions came tumbling over each other into his tired mind. How could that mysterious lady possibly be aware of his 'tamperings' with the accounts. Why did she warn him not to involve Agaton Sax? Why did she keep calling him Mr Pixman? Who was Mr Pixman? And who was *she*?

The only explanation, as far as he could see was that she could only be the mysterious woman who had been baffling Scotland Yard for several months with a series of exceptionally well planned frauds. The popular press referred to her as *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*.

The more he thought about it, the more this explanation seemed to Mr Blimp to be the only possible one. But it was no comfort to him. In fact it caused him to pull more vigorously than ever at the middle finger of his right hand.

Big Brother

In spite of Lisington's protests, Agaton Sax freed the crooks they had locked up in the house in Hampstead. Then, after a few hours of refreshing sleep, the two detectives met again at Lisington's office.

Lisington was out of humour.

'Look at this,' he said, handing a newspaper to Agaton Sax with a gesture of disgust.

It was *The London Clarion*. Splashed across the front page was the following headline:

**PUT YOUR CARDS ON THE TABLE,
LISINGTON!**

and beneath it an equally provocative story.

It is the duty of *The London Clarion* to serve the public. Serving the public means, among other things, telling the public what our public servants are doing, and, just as important, what they are not doing. But this, of course, is impossible, as our readers will realise. If we tried to tell them all the things that the authorities are not doing, we should need so much space for this alone – we calculate about 90 pages a day – that there would be no room for anything else at all. Today, however, we have decided, in the public interest, to give as much space as is needed to inform our readers that Inspector Lisington is doing nothing.

Not a thing.

Nothing at all.

He doesn't even bother to answer the questions our reporters put to him. For several days now we have been asking him if he has anything to say about the notorious London Potato Scandal.

The government is doing nothing.

Not a thing. As usual.

How long will this go on?

This state of knowing nothing, doing nothing, saying nothing?

Put your cards on the table, Lispington. Tell us what you know.

To be continued

'Nice, eh?' demanded Lispington angrily snatching up the paper and flinging it into the wastepaper basket.

Agaton Sax stroked his moustache thoughtfully. The sudden ringing of the telephone bell broke the silence. Lispington grabbed the receiver.

'Hallo!' he said, then listened intently for a few seconds. 'An urgent letter has arrived,' he told Agaton Sax. 'Some sort of parcel, apparently.'

A porter came in and gave Lispington a fat brown envelope.

'A time bomb, perhaps,' suggested Agaton Sax jokingly - but his eyes were watchful. 'Let me feel it, will you?'

He took the letter carefully, weighed it in his hand, then gave it back to Lispington, who tore it open. He read quickly, then a shadow passed over his face. Without a word he handed the letter over to his Swedish friend, who read out the message:

INSPECTOR LISPINGTON, SCOTLAND YARD

Sir, I am writing this letter to you and Agaton Sax. Conspirators are planning a coup that will shock the world.

Their aim is to kidnap both you and Agaton Sax and the scoundrel behind the plot is a man called Mr Pixman. Tomorrow at 17.00 hours A.S. and L. will be seized by the gang and sold to a person who calls himself the Boss. The price agreed on is £14 000 000.

I have positive proof that I am telling you the truth, but for good reasons (blackmail, kidnap, trouble with the police and so on) I prefer to remain anonymous. To prove

to you that I am not bluffing (which incidentally I never do) I enclose the tape of a recording I made about an hour ago. Listen to it, and judge for yourself (or play it to A.S., if you wish).

An anonymous well-wisher

An expression of complete astonishment flitted across Agaton Sax's round face. Meanwhile, Lisington had begun to pace the room as he always did when worried.

'This is fantastic!' said Agaton Sax at last.

'Is it a trap?' asked Lisington.

'Very possibly,' agreed Agaton Sax. 'But we must listen to the tape before we decide what to do.'

Lisington asked for a tape-recorder to be brought to his room at once. As soon as it arrived he put the tape in place and switched it on.

At first they heard nothing but a monotonous buzz which lasted for a couple of minutes. This was followed by a voice that was familiar to both of them.

'Listen, fellow crooks and members of the gang! This is the Boss speaking. I'll start with a roll-call.'

There was a buzz of eager voices as the gang hastened to call out their letters and numbers.

'Is everybody present?'

'Sir, yes!' answered nine voices.

'Good. Now listen to me. One of you already knows that a certain double-dealing rascal by the name of Pixman, together with his slippery confederate, Slim Snoop, has been trying to diddle us out of £14 000 000 of good money. Thanks to my superior intelligence and presence of mind I have outwitted him. Now, we're not going to stop doing business with him because of this. If we were to do business only with *honest* crooks and rogues we'd never manage to make a living, would we? You realize that of course?'

'Yes, sir!'

'Absolutely!'

'As clear as mud, sir!'

'And who would want to do business with *us* in that case, sir?'

An icy silence followed that last somewhat tactless remark. Then the Boss spoke again.

'Who made that last remark?'

No answer.

'Who was it?'

'Not me, sir!'

'Not me, sir!'

'I swear I didn't!'

'I never say that sort of thing, sir!'

'That's enough, shut up! I don't want another word out of any of you. I've heard enough! Do you think I don't know who it was? Half-wits! All your voices are recorded on tapes stored in my secret archives. The traitor who made that disloyal and libellous remark will not take part in tomorrow's big coup. Nor will he benefit from the share out afterwards. Everyone else will get £1 047 each. A 2!'

'Yes, sir! Well said, sir.'

'B 9 can replace the traitor, who is expelled!'

'Very well, sir.'

'That's that then. Now to tomorrow's big coup. Mr Pixman has kidnapped Agaton Sax and Lispington . . .'

There were exclamations of amazement, indignation, and disgust at this appalling news.

That was all. The tape ended there. Agaton Sax and Lispington looked at each other in silence.

'Well, I never . . .' said Lispington. 'This is unexpected! Who on earth can this anonymous friend of ours be?'

Agaton Sax shook his head. It seemed almost incredible.

Not even Clever Dick, his computer, would be able to explain this mystery to him.

'Agaton!' said Lispington suddenly. 'The moment has come for you to tell me who Big Brother is!'

'Exactly,' said Agaton Sax blandly. 'The time has come, are you ready?'

'Always ready.'

'Very well then. This morning I carried out a number of investigations. Let's go into action right away. We'll start at my hotel.'

'Why?'

'We've got to fetch Clever Dick. Would you be kind enough to order a police van for us. Clever Dick won't fit into an ordinary car now that I have added a few extra gadgets to him.'

When they were settled in the van, Agaton Sax remarked:

'In a few minutes you will understand that it would be impossible to find a more suitable task for Clever Dick than the one we are about to give him.'

They drove to the Boss's office, taking with them two police officers disguised as van drivers. As soon as they arrived they carried Clever Dick, in two halves, down to the basement. Lispington's astonishment grew as he followed Agaton Sax down the dark steps. They came to a heavy steel door which Agaton Sax unlocked in a few seconds with his battery-operated, transistorised skeleton key. Then he pushed the door open.

The beams of light from their torches criss-crossed the darkness. The silence felt like the silence of the tomb, perhaps that of Tutankhamun before it was opened. Lispington shuddered. As he stared at an undefinable object in the corner he felt terror take hold of him, and he turned to Agaton Sax, his face ghastly pale.

But Agaton Sax was unmoved. He was smiling – was

it triumph, courage or the certainty of victory that caused him to look so happy?

In the middle of the huge dark cellar they had just entered there was an enormous machine made of shining metal. The light from their torches showed that it was at least ten metres long, two metres broad and three metres high.

This monster seemed to grow in size and power as Agaton Sax let his torch play over its shining surface, lighting up numerous little windows made of different coloured glass, and a complicated array of amplifiers, dials, knobs, buttons, and levers.

Agaton Sax made a sweeping gesture with his right hand, and announced somewhat pompously: 'This, my dear Lispington, is Big Brother, the remarkable computer behind the London Potato Scandal. This is the brain that works out the details, makes the calculations and plans the campaign strategy for all the daring, outrageous coups that the Boss initiates. This is the computer that, by virtue of its brilliant superiority, has a sort of magic power over all other computers - this is the cunning reptile that has wormed its way into *Prill's Pastilles, Ltd* as well as several other highly respectable companies. This is the computer that could dominate the whole world of crime - if it weren't for me - Agaton Sax - and for him - Clever Dick!'

With a final sweeping gesture of pride and determination Agaton Sax asked the two police officers to push in Clever Dick's two halves (which were mounted on wheels). The men, their job finished, saluted and left to station themselves on the pavement outside.

Agaton Sax set about checking Clever Dick. He pressed a number of buttons, opened several small panels at the back of the computer, adjusted various needles and meters. He did all this with such feverish energy that Lispington hardly dared to breathe as he watched him. At last he

snapped a panel at the back shut, and rubbed his hands in satisfaction.

'All done now, Lispington. I'll explain everything to you!' he said with a complacent smile.

But no sooner had he spoken than something quite unexpected happened.

A voice echoed through the room. A voice that sounded as if it were coming from everywhere – the walls, the ceiling, the floor, or the . . . ?

'Are you there?' asked the voice.

Agaton Sax and Lispington looked at each other. They had both turned pale, and both had the same thought:

Was this the voice of Big Brother?

A friend at the end

'Are you there?' repeated the voice.

In the silence that followed Agaton Sax's wonderful mind worked with terrific precision. No, he thought, this is not Big Brother. It's the Boss. He has installed a loud-speaker in this room so that he can give instructions to the men working the computer.

Agaton Sax took Lispington by the arm and pushed him behind the steel door.

'There's a man on his way down; we'll have to put him out of action,' he whispered.

They heard steps in the corridor, a key rattled in the lock, the steel door swung open and a man entered the room. Agaton Sax and Lispington gripped him by the arms, then Agaton Sax quickly locked the door and the crook stared, horrified, at two utterly unexpected, grim faces. With a quick movement Lispington handcuffed him.

'I'm Agaton Sax,' said the Swedish detective threateningly, which made the poor little crook tremble all over.

'All you've got to remember, my dear fellow, if the Boss speaks to you through the loud-speaker, is to keep your mouth shut. Is that clear?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Who are you?'

'B 7, Sir Agaton.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Was Big to I Brother working going get, your lordship.'

'Were those the Boss's orders?'

'Yes, your lordship.'

'Shush!'

They heard the Boss's voice again.

'B 7, are you there?'

'Yes, sir,' answered Agaton Sax in B 7's voice.

'Ask Big Brother how much £14 000 000 will yield in compound interest in twenty years' time.'

'Now, sir?'

'Now! I'm in a hurry!'

'Right, sir.'

Agaton Sax fed the necessary figures into Big Brother and received the answer one-eighth of a second later.

'If you calculate the interest at $6\frac{1}{2}\%$, sir, it will be £17 243 757 940 3, in all.'

'Oh, splendid! Ha-ha, ha-ha!'

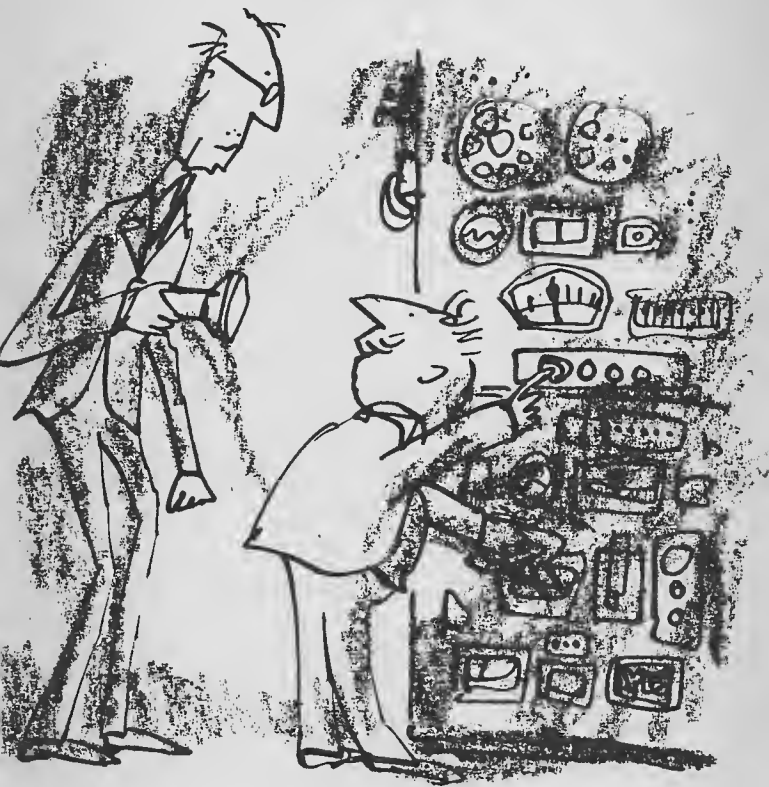
At this point a click indicated that the connection between the microphone and the loudspeaker had been broken.

'Now!' said Agaton Sax, and he set Clever Dick going. He pressed several green, yellow, blue and black buttons, started up a number of tiny wheels and carefully set one or two small indicators.

'Now I shall ask Clever Dick to give me certain secret code numbers,' he explained to Lispington. 'When I've got them I shall feed them into Big Brother, then ask him what the numbers mean.'

Clever Dick's powerful mechanical brain was working at high pressure, the complicated machinery making only a faint purring sound as it made one calculation after another. From time to time different coloured bulbs on the instrument panel lit up for a moment, signalling that a process had been completed. Suddenly it was all over, and a piece of paper covered with figures and letters was in Agaton Sax's hand. He fed the information on it into Big Brother, which in its turn got to work, producing the right answer after only

one-seventh of a second. Trembling with excitement, Lispington bent over the strip of paper, and read the following: 4,3,9,12,Y,T,Erz,Bf,91, Code 67RhT, F 971, 16hhU - Universal Junk Inc. - United Steam Rollers Ltd, u-8 pr.



'Understand?' asked Agaton Sax.

'No!' said Lispington.

'It's quite simple,' said Agaton Sax. 'Universal Junk and United Steam Rollers are at the top of the Boss's list at the moment. Now, let's get on.'

He went through the process with both computers again, and soon got a new series of letters and figures, and the names of two more companies.

'Do you understand now?'

'No, I've told you I don't!'

'Very well then,' said Agaton Sax patiently. 'I'll start again and explain right from the beginning. You see, this is the first time in history that anyone has succeeded in inventing a computer which can plan and perpetrate crime on a large scale. The Boss and Big Brother work together like this. Suppose you have twenty companies or industrial enterprises which operate their own computers. The Boss's first step is to establish a secret radio link with the twenty honest computers belonging to the firms. This is done by bribing one of the technicians who makes regular visits to service the computer. He installs a tiny, almost invisible radio receiver in the computer. Once a secret radio link of this kind has been set up between the company's computer and Big Brother, Big Brother can start feeding data to the other computer! He becomes the Commander-in-Chief, the Boss, in fact! He radios instructions to pay such and such a sum not to x, as on previous occasions, but to y, and so on. You have seen for yourself how it works, Lispington!'

'Dastardly!'

'It is, isn't it? But remember, Lispington, this is only the start, and harmless compared with what is to follow. You can imagine what will happen when the Boss makes his next move.'

'No, I can't. What will happen?' asked Lispington breathlessly.

'Think!'

Lispington thought.

'You mean . . .?'

'Yes, of course! I'm thinking of the day when The Boss,

with Big Brother's help, takes over the government computers. Then the salaries of hundreds of thousands of civil servants will be paid, not to them, but to fictitious people living at addresses supplied by the Boss, so that he and his gang can clean up before anyone realises there has been a mistake. Think of it, Lispington. The country in ruins, the government bankrupt, the people miserably poor. Even *your* salary, Lispington, may vanish into the Boss's pocket.'

Lispington mopped his forehead.

'Cheer up, old chap!' said Agaton Sax. 'It'll never happen, because I'm here to stop it. What a terrible mess you'd all be in if I hadn't decided to see this thing through. But we mustn't waste any more time, we've got to plan tomorrow's campaign at Valley View. Come on, there's no time to lose.'

They went back to Scotland Yard with Clever Dick and the handcuffed crook, and Agaton Sax explained his plan to Lispington, who declared himself entirely satisfied with it.

On the following day, at 15.00 precisely, a car stopped at the gate of Valley View. It was a fine, sunny afternoon, and the birds in the spacious garden were singing cheerfully. Six men got out of the car. Four of them were detectives from Scotland Yard, disguised as Mr Pixman, Slim Snoop and two of their associates. The two others were Agaton Sax and Lispington. They were apparently being carefully guarded by their captors; their hands were tied behind their backs and they were gagged. The four detectives carried revolvers, as real crooks in such a situation would most certainly be armed. Warned by the taped message from their anonymous friend, Agaton Sax and Lispington already knew that a number of crooks were hidden in the garden in order to make sure that Mr Pixman and his confederates really did come to the house, and bring their valuable cargo with them.



As soon as they arrived a message was dispatched by walkie-talkie from the garden to the Boss at his headquarters:

'Gagged Agaton Sax Lispington and are bound have just been into taken house the Pixman by his and three of gang.'

The Boss's reply was:

'Good. Eye on all them the keep time an.'

Agaton Sax, Lispington and the four detectives went up to the first floor. They realized that the Boss had bugged the whole house with hidden microphones, loudspeakers and even T.V. cameras, so they knew it was essential to act as if Agaton Sax and Lispington really were prisoners.

The false Mr Pixman, a Scotland Yard detective you will

remember, ordered his men to chain Agaton Sax and Lispington to the iron bed. Then, holding the key of the padlock, he announced with a broad grin, 'We'll have a game of hunt the thimble, using the key for a thimble.'

He then walked along the corridor until he came to a place where the carpet was worn thin. He slipped the key



under the carpet and returned to his two prisoners; then standing in front of Agaton Sax he addressed him scornfully.

'So you - you stinking little fatty - you thought you were invincible, did you? Ha ha ha! But you couldn't vanquish me, could you? You couldn't conquer Hezekiah Pixman! And you, Mr Lispington - you . . .'

The false Mr Pixman stopped dead, for after all Lispington was his superior, and he could not bring himself to say, to his face, the words which he had prepared.

'Go on!' whispered Lispington, urgently. 'Go on, you must act your part!'

'You, Mr Lispington,' continued the false Mr Pixman, very pale but speaking in a loud, clear voice, 'You are a conceited, insignificant bore. You strut around like a turkey cock, bullying honest crooks – but now we've got you at last. Is that enough, Mr Lispington, need I go on?' he whispered anxiously.

'Quite enough! You've done more than your duty,' Lispington whispered back fiercely.

The false Mr Pixman cleared his throat. Agaton Sax, fixing him with a petrifying stare, said slowly: 'Mr Pixman! You have just made the biggest mistake of your life!'

'Ha ha! Me? What mistake, if I may make so bold as to ask?'

'You thought you could outwit the Boss! And me!'

'You self-opinionated little bully, you swollen-headed, so-called detective, you don't think you can outwit me do you? As for you – you lanky blundering . . .'

'That's enough, Charlie!' whispered Lispington angrily. 'Don't overdo it!'

They waited for over an hour. Agaton Sax and Lispington knew that by now a hundred police officers would have surrounded the whole area, according to the plan of action agreed on the day before.

At 16.40 Lispington would issue his orders, by means of the walkie-talkie he had hidden in his pocket, to all the police under his command. They would advance at once and arrest the crooks hidden in the garden, and, of course, the Boss himself and his bodyguard who were expected just before 17.00.

Everything worked according to plan. A car drove up to the main entrance of the villa, and four men got out. Having looked round cautiously they waited for a minute or two. Then one of them made a signal to the others, and, puffing at enormously expensive Havanna cigars, they walked briskly into the house.

They stopped in the hall. After another signal they went upstairs and knocked at the first door in the corridor.

'Come in!' answered the false Mr Pixman.

They entered the room. The ten men weighed each other up silently. Then one of the four crooks nodded, and said:

'O.K. Mr Pixman. I recognize Agaton Sax and Lispington. The goods are genuine all right. I'll go and hide the £14 000 000 in one of the other rooms, according to our agreement.'

'O.K.,' said the false Mr Pixman. 'In exactly five minutes from now the loud-speaker will tell you where the key to the padlock is hidden, and at the same moment you must let me know where you have put the money.'

The Boss's four men withdrew into one of the other rooms.

'Where's the Boss?' whispered one of them.

'He said he'd be in the next room.'

'Do you think we'd better have a look?'

They looked in the next room, and in the next. But all the rooms were empty. A deathly pallor spread over their four faces. They puffed wildly at their cigars. This was a terrible blow. Why hadn't the Boss turned up? Where was he? What had happened? He should have arrived long before them, and concealed himself in one of the rooms.

'He's cheated us.'

'He's made off with the loot!'

'Shush! He'll hear us!'

'I don't give a damn if he does! If he's scarpered with the dough he doesn't deserve any respect!'

At that moment, a voice spoke from the loudspeaker in the corridor:

'The key is under the worn patch of carpet at the end of the corridor.'

The crooks made a dash for it, one of them grabbed the key, and all four rushed to the room where the prisoners were held.

But that wasn't all that happened. Before the crooks realised what was going on some seventy police officers stormed the house, while the remaining thirty took good care of the crooks hidden in the garden.

Lispington heaved a sigh of relief and, his face shining like the morning sun, called out: 'By capture, is the this biggest Jove ever we've made!' His faithful subordinates looked at each other in horror, wondering whether the strain and stress he'd been under had been too much for him.

But Agaton Sax remained silent, as if he were listening to an inner voice prophesying doorn, and his eyes seemed to be fixed on some remote object that no one else could see. Small beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. This was terrible! Shocking! A disaster!

'The Boss . . .' he murmured. 'The Boss . . .'

'What is it, my dear Agaton?' said Lispington, patting his friend on the back. 'What's the matter, my dear fellow?'

'The Boss,' Agaton Sax murmured again.

'Well, what about him? We've got the whole gang, haven't we?'

'No! We haven't got the Boss. Don't you understand, Lispington? *He isn't here!* He's made fools of us!'

'What in Heaven's name are you talking about?' exclaimed Lispington, thunderstruck as the significance of what Agaton Sax had said began to strike him. 'Surely the Boss must be one of these men? That tall one with the scar on his chin, for example?'



Agaton Sax didn't answer, only shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of irritation.

'Oh no,' he murmured. 'Oh no . . . How awful . . .'

He was crushed. What he had expected to be the peak of his career had suddenly proved to be just the opposite – his worst defeat! The Boss had outwitted him! He, Agaton Sax, had unmasked the man, seen through his diabolical scheme, saved thousands of firms and companies from ruin and inevitable bankruptcy, even, perhaps, saved the governments of Europe from insolvency, though their policies were so rotten they didn't deserve salvation. But at the last, the final triumph, the capture of the Boss was denied him. The Boss had eluded his grasp.

Had the Boss known of Agaton Sax's ingenious plan all the time? Perhaps Big Brother, his computer, had warned him of what was going on.

Lispington was in a terrible tiz, and his fears were in no way calmed when he suddenly heard voices coming from the floor below and saw his normally placid friend go pale, then turn his head in order to hear better.

Agaton Sax stroked his chin, thoughtful, worried. That voice . . .? He raised his hand, demanding silence, and they all listened intently. The excited voices downstairs seemed to get louder.

'Haven't you heard me say at least twenty times that you must leave this house?' said one of the police sergeants, obviously at the point of losing his patience.

'I have heard you say so, yes!' answered a determined female voice.

'Then why don't you go?'

'I wouldn't dream of it!'

'You wouldn't? Can't you understand that we're working?'

'Do you call this working?'

'Certainly! We are striving to maintain law and order and uphold society. If it's of any interest to you, we have just arrested one of this century's most dangerous criminals.'

'Have you now? Get along with you!'

'We'll get along better without *you*, lady! You are interfering with police work, and we have no time to spare for curious passers-by.'

'You don't have to tell me that you are engaged in police work, you ignorant fellow, I can see that for myself.'

'I'm telling you because I have to,' shouted the sergeant angrily. 'Now, will you please go away, or must I have you removed by force!'

'You'll do no such thing, young man!' retorted the female voice.

Agaton Sax wiped the perspiration from his brow, and shot an anguished glance at Lispington, who was listening open-mouthed.

'Agaton . . .' Lispington said hoarsely, pressing his palm against his temples in despair. 'Agaton . . . No! No, not this! Not now! Not on your day of triumph! No! It can't be she!'

'She? Who?' said Agaton Sax pretending not to understand.

'She - the old lady - your aunt! I would recognize her voice anywhere. How could I forget it? Agaton - we just haven't got time for her now.'

'Shush! she's saying something!' whispered Agaton Sax.

'That's what I mean,' replied Lispington angrily. 'She's saying something! She's always saying something or doing something! Haven't I warned you, Agaton, she's a menace and should never be allowed near us when we are on the job?'

'Exactly,' said Agaton Sax, colour returning to his pale cheeks. 'Ask her to come up, Lispington.'

'Oh no!' moaned Lispington, but he did as he was told. Crossing to the door he called down the stairs: 'Let the lady come up here! We know her. More's the pity,' he added, sighing deeply.

Here she was now – brandishing an umbrella green with age and not in the least out of breath after running up the stairs.

'I say, Agaton,' she announced as soon as she saw him, 'you really shouldn't mix with policemen, they're so slow-witted and so behind the times. But I didn't take any notice of them, I knew you were here, and I must talk to you before those ninnies get the upper hand.'

'Aunt Matilda!' said Agaton Sax, wiping his forehead again. 'I'm relieved to see you're all right. But what on earth are you doing in London?'

'All right? Of course I'm all right. Why shouldn't I be? And why shouldn't I be in London? I knew you'd never cope with this. You and that man Lispington,' she added in Swedish.

Lispington, hearing his name mentioned, said testily:

'What's she saying about me?'

'She's saying she knew we'd never cope with this affair,' Agaton Sax answered quietly.

'Oh, so that's what she thinks, is it?'

After this mild outburst, Lispington's anger seemed to evaporate. He turned to Agaton Sax with a sigh.

'I'm afraid she's right in saying we couldn't cope,' he admitted sadly.

'Why didn't we arrest the Boss on the spot? Why? Why? And yet I warned you, Agaton! Now you can see for yourself that I was right, we've been fooled! Taken for a ride! We're idiots, that's what we are!'

'Quite so!' said Aunt Matilda in English. (She'd been

learning English and made astonishing progress.) 'Why didn't you take my advice, Agaton?'

'Your advice, Aunt?'



'Yes, I told you that Mr Pixman would kidnap you, didn't I?'

'But, you see, Aunt, Mr Pixman - I'm Mr Pixman,' said Agaton Sax as gently as he could.

'Mr Pixman - so you're Mr Pixman?' said Aunt Matilda. 'And the Boss - is he Lispington?'

'No, Aunt, but you must understand that Mr Pixman is a creature of my imagination, an invention of my own, a . . .'

'Fiddlesticks!' interrupted Aunt Matilda. 'I've heard enough of this nonsense. *I have seen Mr Pixman, Agaton!* I've talked to him across a café table – and I have warned him!'

She lifted a threatening forefinger.

Lispington sank down on a chair, shaking his head in despair. He was completely lost.

'I'm sorry, Aunt,' said Agaton Sax, 'but that isn't possible. You see, Mr Pixman doesn't exist in the real world, only in the world of my imagination, and in that of the Boss. But we'll talk this over in more detail to-night. Right now, Aunt, our job is to hunt down the Boss, and . . .'

'The Boss? Why?' exclaimed Aunt Matilda.

'Because he's the cleverest criminal this century has known. Unfortunately we've only got his gang, and not him – yet.'

Lispington buried his face in his hands, groaning inwardly as he thought of what certain Government officials would have to say to him this very night.

'But how could you hope to get the Boss?' went on Aunt Matilda.

'Well, with my superior intelligence and with Scotland Yard's superb methods . . .' said Agaton Sax with quiet self-confidence.

'And if we'd been allowed to concentrate on our work – without hindrance from interfering busy-bodies,' growled Lispington.

'I see!' said Aunt Matilda scornfully. 'It's a good thing for all of us that I have my own methods!'

'Your own methods, Aunt?' said Agaton Sax surprised. 'Have you . . .?'

'You bet I have, Agaton!'

Agaton Sax seemed stunned by this remark, and Lispington threw up his hands in disgust.

'Now you listen to me, Agaton,' said Aunt Matilda, so forcefully that Agaton Sax had no alternative. 'I've been shadowing you all the time. After all these years of having you hurrying and bustling here and there between Bykoping and London, I got so fed up that I decided this time I would follow you. When I arrived in London I decided to shadow the Boss, so I dressed myself as a charwoman, and I installed hidden bugging devices and tape-recorders in his office – and recorded an important tape which I sent along to that man Lispington warning you about Mr Pixman and about the Boss but you didn't listen to my warnings, for you men never have the sense to listen to the advice of an intelligent woman.'

'What's she saying?' asked Lispington wearily. 'Getting at me, as usual, I suppose?'

'You men think you know everything,' Aunt Matilda continued undaunted, 'but that's just where you're wrong, and I've learned English in secret for all these years and I've taught myself how to use all your buggings and codes and telepathic gadget; and tape-recorders and confusers and the rest, so there's no fooling me any longer, and when I had recorded that silly conversation between the Boss and his creatures which I sent by mail to Lispington, I went on recording, and I got to know things that *you* didn't know because you think you know everything which you don't, and that's that.'

'No!' exclaimed Lispington. 'She's going too far!'

'Just a minute, Aunt!' said Agaton Sax. 'We can talk about this later – at this moment our job is to hunt down the Boss.'

'Hunt down the Boss?' said Aunt Matilda. 'Why?'

'Why?' said Agaton Sax flabbergasted. 'Why? But I've just told you why!'

'But why?'

'Why what, Aunt?'

'Why hunt him down?'

'Well, as far as we know, he's the most . . .'

'As far as I know you don't have to hunt him down!'

'As far as you know, Aunt?'

'Exactly.'

'Exactly what, Aunt?'

'Exactly what I'm saying. Why?'

'Why?'

'Why hunt him down?'

Agaton Sax began to twitch nervously.

'Why don't you look in the garage?' went on Aunt Matilda.

'In the garage?' he echoed helplessly.

'In the garage!'

'You want us to look in the garage?'

'Yes!'

'Why?'

'Why? You're looking for the Boss, aren't you. Or perhaps you aren't.'

'We are, yes.'

'Well, look in the garage, then.'

'For the Boss?'

'Yes, for the Boss.'

'What' in heaven's name is she talking about?' shouted Lispington, jumping up from his chair. 'Is she trying to sell us a garage?'

'Shush! Perhaps she's on to something,' said Agaton Sax. 'Go on Aunt, we're listening.'

'I don't see what's so complicated about it, if only you didn't keep trying to interrupt me all the time. I told you,

I listened to that telephone conversation between Mr Pixman and the Boss, and it made me realize that I must keep watch outside your hotel, Agaton. So I sat there, waiting in a little car I had hired, waiting for Mr Pixman to come and kidnap you – and suddenly, there he was, a plump gentleman, a *man* rather, he certainly wasn't a gentleman and his morals leave much to be desired, Agaton, I can tell you, and he went up to the receptionist in the hotel lobby and asked for you, but you weren't in, so he couldn't kidnap you, but I followed him in my car, and I warned him, and very rude and impolite he was to me considering I'm a lady, but I . . .'

'No, Aunt, this is impossible!' exclaimed Agaton Sax. 'I've already told you that Mr Pixman doesn't exist, and . . .'

'Don't interrupt me, Agaton, and don't try to tell me that he doesn't exist, for he does exist although you don't know him because you don't know everything, Agaton, but haven't I told you I heard his voice speaking to the Boss? And then I found out that he, the Boss that is, would be driving to this house *earlier* than the others, and as a matter of fact he arrived here at half past one. And why did he arrive here so early? Because I told him to!'

'*You* told him to, Aunt?'

'Yes, I did. It was very simple. I just rang him up, and in a gruff voice I told him I was A 5, calling him from a telephone box near this house, and told him that I had seen Mr Pixman creep into the garage and hide a key there, which was a lie of course, and really one shouldn't tell lies but since I spoke with another person's voice it wasn't really a lie, was it? Not my lie anyway, I mean you could call it acting or something, couldn't you? After all lying is something you do for yourself, with your own voice isn't it? Anyhow, I told the Boss that I hadn't told the other crooks about Mr Pixman and the key and the garage, and if the Boss wished, he could come right away and take the key

hidden in the garage, and he said O.K., I'll come right now, because he planned to kidnap you and that Mr Lispington and go away with you without having to pay anything at all to Mr Pixman and not even pay his own men their wages – such a mean brute, such a stinking miser – and after that telephone call I sneaked down into the garage, hiding just inside the door, and I could see with my own eyes that no one in the world, *no one*, I tell you, Agaton, would be able to get out of that garage if that no one went to find the key and I locked the door from the outside. So I stood there waiting in the dark, and when he arrived, the Boss that is, he went straight to the back of the garage, because I had told him on the phone that the key was hidden in an oil-can there, and he walked right into my oil-can . . . my trap, I mean, and I sneaked out of the garage and locked the door, and there he's sitting now, or standing, I don't know which, and you can take him away whenever you want, but where that Mr Pixman has gone to, I can't tell you, because he isn't here, as far as I can see.'

Just three minutes later, they arrested the Boss and gave him the honour of securing him with two pairs of handcuffs. One of the greatest threats modern civilization had ever faced had been successfully warded off.

Loosening his collar thankfully, Lispington mused:

'Well, well, well . . . I daresay this means a medal for your Aunt. And quite a substantial reward from the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Board of Trade, not to mention the . . . well . . . Just fancy . . .'

He and Agaton Sax were standing in the dark garage, Agaton Sax seemed to be lost in thought.

'You coming, Agaton?' Lispington asked his friend.

Agaton Sax straightened up. Then he shone his torch on the floor. At some time a child must have played there and left a wooden spade.

'Look, Lispington,' said Agaton Sax, pointing to some shallow scratches in the concrete. Look! Like the Count of Monte-Cristo, the Boss tried to dig himself out! What a fantastic crook!' he went on, reluctantly admiring his enemy. 'Look at those scratches! No sooner had Aunt Matilda locked him up than he started digging with this little spade. What will-power! A man of iron – or concrete! What an indomitable spirit! Never say die! I'm sure that if we asked Clever Dick or Big Brother to work it out they would tell us that it would have taken him at least one hundred and eighteen years to dig himself out with that little spade!'



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